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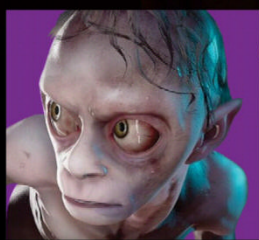
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FUTURE

ISSUE 372



**MOD
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COUNTER-STRIKE
MEETS SKYRIM?!



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PLAY AS MIDDLE-EARTH'S
FAVOURITE FREAKY SNEAK



PREVIEW

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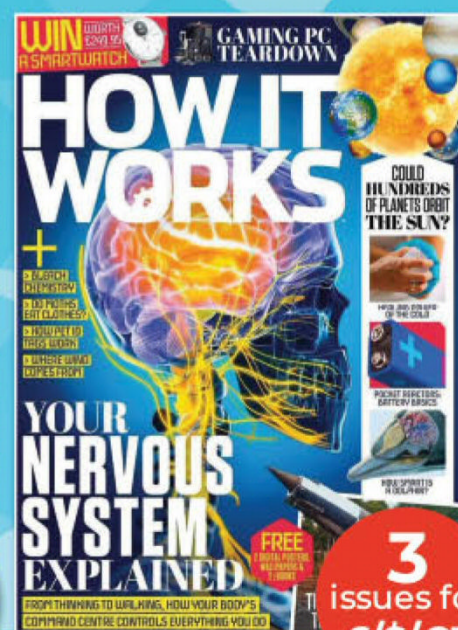
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“OUR HANDS-ON REVEALS A VERY SURPRISING BEAST”



Honestly, there's probably no phrase more likely to get the PC Gamer office all a-flutter than “The creators of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* are working on...”. We've been champing at the bit to do a proper deep dive on the team's upcoming Marvel game, *Midnight Suns*, since it was first announced. Now, finally, we have that feature for you.

ROBIN VALENTINE**Twitter**

@robinlvalentine

This month

Put a bunch of Biro's between his knuckles and said “Snikt!” to anyone who would listen.

Our hands-on reveals a very surprising beast – a game with the strategy smarts of *XCOM*, but equally influenced by BioWare RPGs, *Slay the Spire* and... billiards, sort of? It's bold, it's experimental, and it's quite unlike anything Firaxis have made before.

ROBIN VALENTINE**PRINT EDITOR**robin.valentine@futurenet.com**SUBSCRIBE TO****PC GAMER**Check out our
latest offer!**SEE p48**

The PC Gamer team

**TYLER WILDE****Twitter**

@tyler_wilde

This month

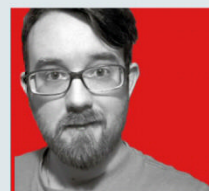
Went on an actual trip to play a videogame in person! Honestly I don't think it'll catch on.

**LAUREN AITKEN****Twitter**

@L_Aitken

This month

Kept talking about the new Disney game, no matter how many times we asked her to let it go...

**FRASER BROWN****Twitter**

@FraserIBrown

This month

Checked in on the new *Saints Row*, to make sure it hasn't suddenly gone dark and gritty.

**TED LITCHFIELD****Twitter**

@DORFpatrol

This month

Stepped into the shoes of The Lord of the Rings' Gollum. Or, er, lack of shoes I guess.

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Contents

#372
AUGUST 2022

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Monitor

- 08 THE TOP STORY
- 10 THE SPY
- 12 SPECIAL REPORT
- 14 POSITIVE INFLUENCE
- 16 DNA TRACING
- 20 INCOMING

Previews

- 24 Saints Row
- 28 Disney Dreamlight Valley
- 30 The Lord of the Rings: Gollum
- 32 Gerda: A Flame in Winter
- 34 F1 Manager 22
- 36 Stormgate
- EARLY ACCESS
- 38 V Rising

Feature

- 40 Midnight Suns
- 50 Micro-RPGs



30

40



24 SAINTS ROW

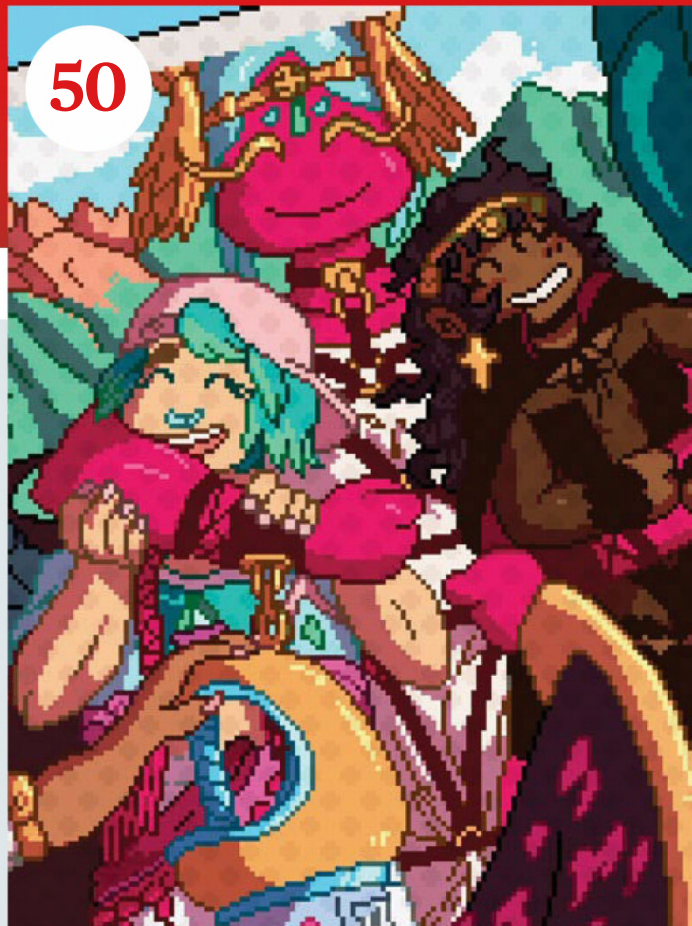
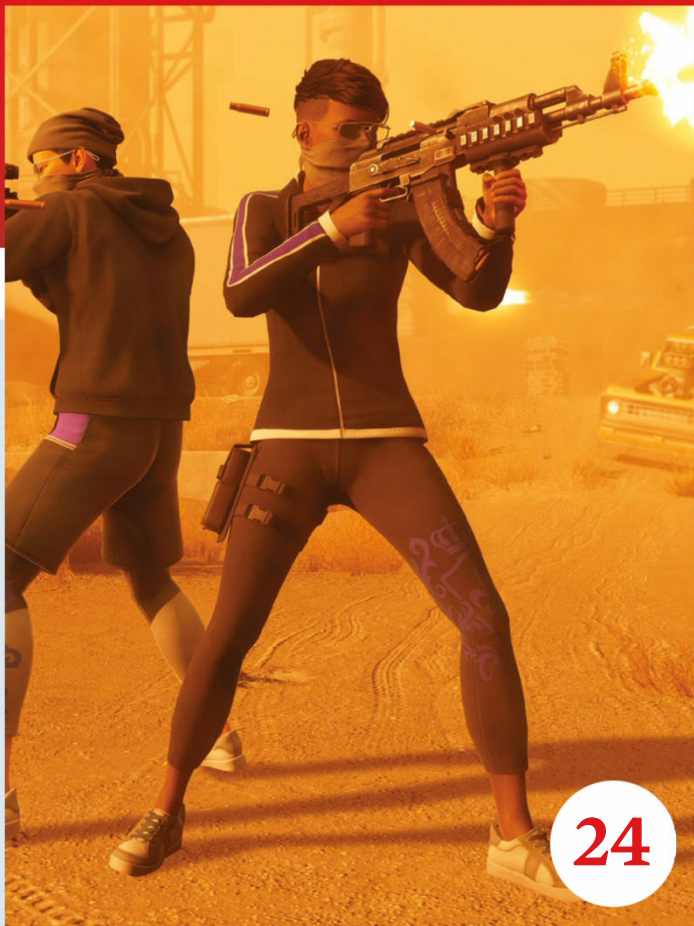
After previous games blew up the world and travelled to literal hell, a reboot probably makes sense. But does it have the anarchic spirit that makes the series so lovable?

40 MIDNIGHT SUNS

We've been hands-on, behind-the-scenes, and chatted with XCOM mastermind Jake Solomon to get the ultimate lowdown on this superheroic strategy game.

50 MICRO-RPGS

Why do we always expect an RPG to be 100 hours long? Can you evoke the best parts of the genre in a far shorter form? Meet the indie devs that are working on just that.



62 HARDSPACE: SHIPBREAKER

Sure, flying spaceships is fun, but it turns out there's nothing more satisfying than breaking them.

94 GAMING LAPTOPS

We review six of the best new gaming laptops on the market, to help you make the right choice.

118 WILDERMYTH

A group of dysfunctional idiots who don't get on set out to achieve an impossible task in our latest Diary. This one hits a bit too close to home, honestly.

Reviews

- 62 **Hardspace: Shipbreaker**
- 66 **Eternal Threads**
- 68 **Sniper Elite 5**
- 72 **Vampire: The Masquerade – Swansong**
- 76 **Citizen Sleeper**
- 78 **Unexplored 2**
- 82 **Trek to Yomi**
- 84 **Salt and Sacrifice**

FREE GAMES

- 88 **Our Lady of Sorrow**
- 89 **Looper**
- 89 **Out of the Blue**

THEY'RE BACK

- 90 **Far Cry**
- 91 **Grow Home**
- 91 **Firewatch**
- 91 **Eastshade**
- 91 **Proteus**

Hardware

- 94 **GROUP TEST**
- 98 **TECH REPORT**
- 100 **TECH TALES**
- 102 **BUYER'S GUIDE**

Extra Life

106 NOW PLAYING
Playing *Slay the Spire* with an enthusiastic audience.

110 UPDATE
Catching up on *Guild Wars 2*'s huge new expansion.

112 MOD SPOTLIGHT
Counter-Strike meets *Skyrim* and *Fallout* in *coop_mission_rage*.

116 HOW TO
Get the most out of open world games – and clear your backlog.

118 DIARY
Saving the world with a group of awkward misfits in *Wildermyth*.

122 WHY I LOVE
The joys of managing a hostess club in *Yakuza 0*.

124 REINSTALL
Is *Nuclear Throne* still the reigning king of action roguelikes?

128 MUST PLAY
Phil pretends that he's played anything other than *Destiny 2* this year.

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



War continues to rage in Ukraine.

UNDER SIEGE

How the Russian invasion is affecting **UKRAINIAN** studios

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was a major escalation in a conflict that has been ongoing since 2014. It is the most significant geopolitical event of the year, has created a refugee crisis, and led to unprecedented global sanctions against the Russian state.

The war has impacted the game development scene too, with the wider industry taking a clear pro-Ukraine stance. The biggest commitment was made by Epic Games which, shortly after the war began, announced it would donate

two weeks' worth of *Fortnite* profits after launching a new season: this raised an astonishing \$144 million USD for humanitarian relief organisations.

MAKING THE MOVE

Within Ukraine itself, the impact has been most visible with the high-

THE IMPACT HAS BEEN MOST VISIBLE WITH THE HIGH-PROFILE STUDIOS

profile studios. *STALKER 2* developer GSC Game World was based in the capital city Kyiv, but is currently in the process of relocating to Prague, and in March ceased operations in Russia. GSC has condemned the "inhuman cruelty" of the invasion, raised \$800,000 with a bundle of its games, and been explicit about this being a question of survival for its employees and their families.

These, however, are only two of the many stories coming out of the conflict. There's a wider trend in tech: at one end of the scale Microsoft is disrupting Russian cyberattacks, and Tesla is supplying its Starlink technology to keep

RETROH-NO

FORGERY SCANDAL



The PC game collecting community was rocked by accusations that one of its most prominent members has for years been selling forged copies of rare games. One collector group has found more than \$100,000 in transactions involving suspected counterfeit games so far. ■ **TW**

MANY TANKS

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE



An image of new Chinese anti-tank ammunition appeared on the *War Thunder* forums, reportedly after a player got mad that the game's simulation of the round was wrong. Gaijin Entertainment again asked players to stop sharing classified intelligence on its forums. ■ **AC**



IOU

\$420 MILLION DEBT



At the onset of Covid-19, Activision Blizzard deferred the franchise payments of teams in the *Overwatch* and *Call of Duty* esports leagues. Two years on, the dues owed total up to \$420 million. With *Overwatch 2* failing to impress and ActiBlizz's scandals, it can't risk alienating team owners. ■ **TL**



TOP: The *Sherlock Holmes* developer Frogwares has received an Epic MegaGrant and relocated out of Kyiv, though defiantly announced it was making a new game at the same time.

Ukraine online. At the other, Russian esports teams have been banned from the ESL, studios like Ubisoft have provided emergency housing and funding for employees fleeing the conflict, and there are melancholy sidenotes like the Mariupol Computer Museum being bombed and destroyed (though thankfully no-one was hurt).

INTERNATIONAL PARIAH

Various games and studios have changed plans. *Euro Truck Simulator 2* cancelled a planned *Heart of Russia* DLC, *New World* halted work on its Russian localisation, CD Projekt halted all sales in Russia (and its ally Belarus), while countless titles have been delayed.

There's currently no end in sight to the war. Outside of the gaming and tech bubble many massive corporations have ceased operations in Russia, and the country is currently looking like an international pariah.

It may seem on the surface crass to talk about videogames in the context of a war. But this is how a conflict manifests its chaos and disruption: the lives and workplaces uprooted, possibly permanently, and re-starting elsewhere. The world continues to look for a sane and peaceful outcome. But even if that comes, this war's impacts will be felt for decades to come.

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

PCStation

Marvel's Spider-Man will be out on PC by the end of 2022.

Onecraft

Minecraft developer Mojang has now made it so anyone with the game has the Java and Bedrock editions.

PvP god

Final Fantasy XIV director Naoki Yoshida apologised for PvP balance changes that made black mage – his main class – overpowered.

Mon dieu!

The French ministry of culture has issued long French replacements for English words like 'streamer'.

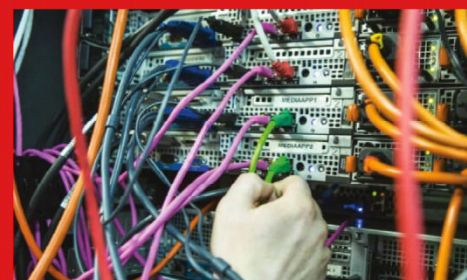
Abandoned abandoned?

A game by Blue Box Studios that some speculated was a new *Silent Hill* appears to be in disarray.

Admin error

Han Bing, a database administrator for Lianjia, wiped the company's servers in anger they'd ignored his security warnings.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Unflappability is a critical facet of espionage. As The Spy's mentor used to say, "A flapped spy is a dead spy." Sure you might find yourself deep in a subterranean lair, alarms blaring after you inadvertently tripped the laser detection system, henchmen flanking you on all sides. Every fibre of your being might be telling you that this, right here, is a situation worth getting in a flap over. But that is exactly when a true professional will crack a slight smile, as if to say that, no, it is *you* that have fallen into my trap. This is also known as the JoJo's Bizarre Adventure school of spycraft.

What The Spy's mentor didn't mention was that, in order for this to work, you do need to actually follow through with a brilliant plan that turns the tables on the whole situation. Pure confidence will only get you so far, as his many, many captures can attest.

Nonetheless, it's a lesson that Konami could stand to learn from. When Twitter leaker AestheticGamer shared four images that they claimed were for a new *Silent Hill* game, there was room for doubt. But then those images were hit by a DMCA takedown by Konami itself, which only helped to focus attention on the claims. The lawyers got themselves in a flap, and now everyone is assuming that these leaks are legitimate.



THE SPY
The Spy's house is 50% Post-it notes

Two of the images show some very messy rooms – dilapidated spaces littered with trash and, because *Silent Hill* is a horror series, a baby's cot. The other two are more conceptual. In one, a red corridor is constructed out of Post-it notes that say things like "fat bitch" and "pervert" – just normal things to write and stick on a wall. The other shows a woman's face, but with parts replaced by similar Post-it scrawled messages that say "minger" and "I hate myself".

The red corridor is similar to another leaked image, a piece of concept art seemingly signed by Masahiro Ito – art director on previous *Silent Hill* games. In it, a piece of graffiti references The Life of Brian's "He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy" line, which, alongside the use of slang like 'minger' has led people to believe that it could be set in Britain.

According to VGC, these images are in fact part of a PT-style teaser game codenamed *Sakura*. This will, it's claimed, be a free title designed to build anticipation for a wider glut of *Silent Hill* projects.

As for what these projects will be, we have multiple people claiming to have the inside scoop. First is podcaster NateTheHate2, who claims that Bloober Team is working on a *Silent Hill 2* remake. This would, he says, feature reworked puzzles and new endings, and be a "timed PlayStation console exclusive". Other *Silent Hill* projects seemingly include side-stories and a new mainline entry in the series.

Jeff Grubb followed up, quote-tweeting NateTheHate2 and saying "this is the stuff I've heard, and it comes from multiple different sources". VGC then claimed that, according to its sources, publisher Annapurna Interactive could be working on the 'stories' side-project.

The irony in all this is that Bloober Team rose to fame with *Layers of Fear*, a game that was heavily inspired by Konami's *PT*. And yet, despite many people pointing out the very obvious and numerous ways their game, er, referenced the *Silent Hill* teaser, the clearly unflappable studio has apparently navigated that attention towards a position working on the series. Spy out. ■
The Spy

THESE IMAGES ARE PART OF A PT-STYLE TEASER GAME CODENAMED SAKURA

This month in... 2012



1 A treat of an issue for strategy fans. Not only does *Total War* grace the cover again, but the preview section leads with a hands-on report from Firaxis' *XCOM* reboot. This was a big deal: for years prior, large publishers seemed mostly interested in what would do well on consoles. Now there was money in creating games tailor-made for PC.

ISSUE
242, August 2012
ON THE COVER
Total War: Rome II
IN THE CINEMAS
Prometheus

2 *Diablo III* gets a 90, despite its real-money auction house and always-online DRM. But if you read the review that comes before the score, you'd understand why it's so high.



3 A loving tribute to PC Gamer's now defunct *Minecraft* server, complete with a beautiful opening spread depicting some of its most breathtaking builds – including a giant, hovering tribute to *Space Invaders*, a very large dinosaur, and the massive avatars of the server's own mod team. A selection of interviews showcase just how much work went into this space.

Join the conversation!



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PC GAMER

Special Report

PCG INVESTMENT



VTuber Tsuyu Natsuri took part in the gag and played *Smite* as budget xQc.

FACE OFF

VTuber **FOFAMIT** turns popular Twitch streamer faces into virtual flesh masks

Nobody asked for the ability to wear the faces of xQc, HasanAbi, and Nicolas Cage as VTuber models, but now you can, thanks to streamer and VTuber creator Fofamit. Each model stretches and deforms along with your facial movements like your face is made out of Play-Doh. All you need is a camera or an iPhone and a facial capture app to replicate the horror.

Fofamit has made several cursed models, but the most popular of them is her haunted xQc mask. She made it in response to his and other streamer's controversial misuse of the VTuber Twitch tag recently.

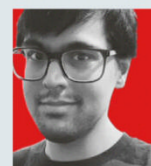
Snuffy, one of Twitch's most popular VTubers, put on her best xQc impression and Fofamit's nightmarish version of his face and streamed with it. For an entire hour, Snuffy, as budget xQc, played *Fortnite* with her impression of the popular streamer's rapid commentary, punctuated only by 'dude' and 'bro'. Chat played along and watched as xQc's face grotesquely slid back and forth over one of Snuffy's normal models. "Fofamit did great at finding a joke in the drama of it all with their talent," Snuffy said. "I kinda hope to see more like this in general, Vtubers have endless potential to be anything. As long as it's respectful it can be hilarious or super cool."

The VTuber tag, added last year, is usually filled with anime and cartoon-styled characters chatting and gaming, but it's also pretty common for the top spots to be taken up by streamers like xQc, Amouranth, and HasanAbi (who all stream with their normal faces). For xQc, who was using the tag in a stream at the time of this writing, it appears to all be for laughs, as evidenced in a clip where he explains that he's indeed a VTuber (which also includes a seemingly transphobic joke).

Tags are supposed to help you find streamers to watch by providing categories like 'Educational', 'ADHD' and 'PVE' to choose from, but, because they're chosen by the creator's themselves, they're not always that useful. There are hyper-specific tags, like 'Auditory ASMR', 'Backseating Allowed', and 'Speedrun', and then there are tags like 'Anime'. Outside of the larger categories like 'Just Chatting' and 'Music', tags can only communicate so much about what you're in for watch.

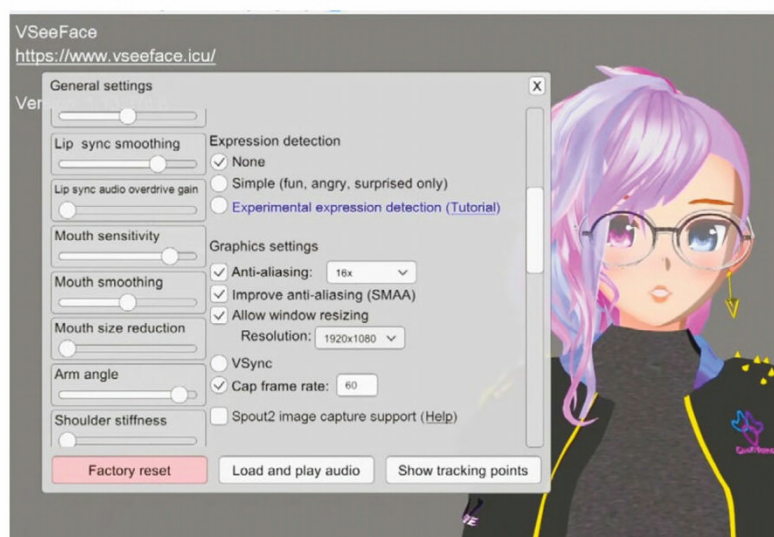
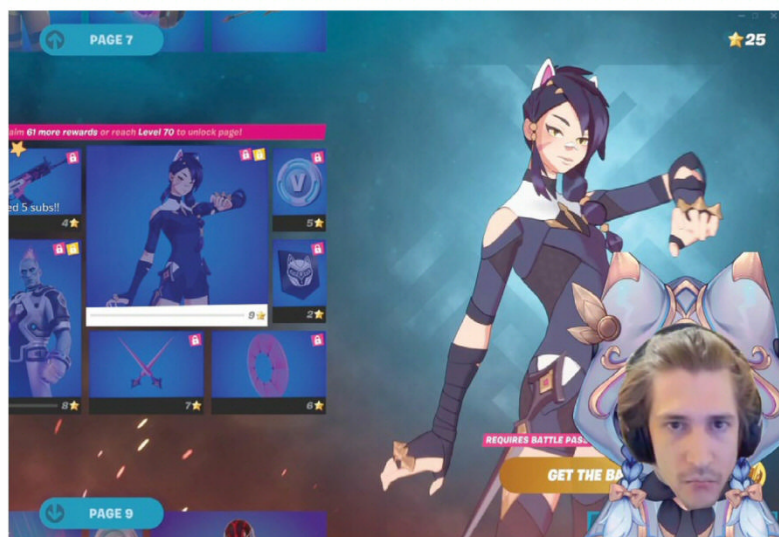
FLESHTUBERS

Marina, a VTuber, made a post – which now has over 6,000 votes – explaining how they believe misusing the tag prevents viewers from finding actual VTubers. They also argue that it goes against Twitch's stated policy that "deliberate misuse of titles, tags, games/categories, or other metadata" is prohibited.



Animated discussion

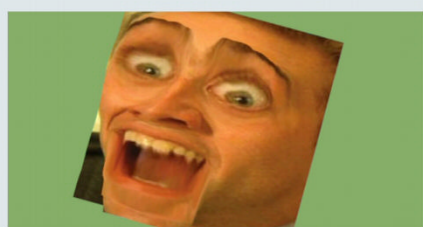
Originally popularised in Japan, VTubers have recently exploded in the west with many indie and company-owned streamers climbing the ranks on Twitch and YouTube. Streamers use software to mimic their facial expressions on avatars, many of which are characters like catgirls, vampires, and dragons. The virtual idols of the sci-fi future are here and they are live playing *Minecraft*.



FAR LEFT: Snuffy's entire chat played along as she wore xQc's face and played *Fortnite*.

LEFT: Fofamit regularly posts tips and guides on how to get started as a VTuber.

UGLY MUGS *Fofamit's most cursed face models*



NICOLAS CAGE
It's like the meme but so much worse. This Nic Cage model moves way too much, it's horrifying.



HASANABI
The popular leftist streamer would probably approve of Fofamit giving his face to the people, but it is terrifying.



TUBE MAN
If you've ever wanted to cosplay as a waving tube man to promote your stream, this is your chance.



MINECRAFT ALEX
This might look like a normal *Minecraft* character, but Fofamit's model reacts to all your facial movements.

"We share and understand your concerns about how the intentional, repeated misuse of tags can undermine the purpose of the tags product itself," Twitch admin downski wrote in reply to the topic. "We also do not feel Twitch should be the judge of creators' personal or creative identity, so we typically only enforce against the misuse of tags when it is associated with other behaviour that violates our community guidelines such as hateful conduct or harassment."

To Fofamit, the VTuber tag misuse is just another example of Twitch not following its own rules. The streaming platform has a turbulent history of enforcing its policies, especially when it comes to hate speech and harassment. The misuse of the VTuber tag, whether or not it robs streamers of potential viewers, doesn't seem to be actively harming anyone, but it does underline the problems with the tag system in general and Twitch's larger discoverability issue for anyone that doesn't already bring in thousands of viewers.

"I saw what was happening and thought it would be fun to make the people who say they are VTubers, who technically aren't VTubers, VTubers."

"The reason the model is so cursed like that is because it's super easy to rig (since I've done fun models like that previously), and I've intentionally made them poorly/funny so there could be no mistake it's like a 'mask.'"

Fofamit, a certified teacher and VTuber herself, makes educational videos about streaming and rigging (usually normal) VTuber models on her YouTube and Twitch channels. She was frustrated with the lack of information

on the internet about how to get a VTuber model working, so she learned how to do it and started sharing it with others. Along the way, she created various animated models, including a malleable Nicolas Cage, HasanAbi, Clippy, *Minecraft* Steve, and an inflatable tube person. Fofamit sells them online along with her regular models for cheap compared to the hundreds of dollars VTuber models usually go for.

"Making the cursed facial rigged models are pretty easy, since they don't need to be 'high quality', they can usually be created in a few hours," she said. "Rigging actual models to look nice and expressive is a lot more work on the other hand, but as I mentioned making these fun cursed models has taught me different methods and given me a chance to experiment to learn new things."

Fofamit has tutorials on how to get the cursed models working, which involves downloading a facial tracking app for your phone or PC. Though they're mostly a joke, the models are her way of trying to make VTubing more accessible.

Fofamit said she isn't finished making these horrific VTuber models because they help her learn different ways of rigging faces.

"I am planning to make a custom Unreal Engine facial rig," she said. "I've had this idea for a while... basically having soft body physics driven by iPhone tracking if that makes sense? In my mind I am thinking of the *Super Mario 64* face stretching that you could do before you get to the save select."

Tyler Colp

FOFAMIT SAID SHE ISN'T FINISHED MAKING THESE VTUBER MODELS

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

NORTHERN LIGHTS

Inside the dioramic mind of Oskar Stålberg, creator of **TOWNSCAPER**

Oskar Stålberg joined UsTwo Games for two reasons. Firstly, the pay was better than he could get at Ubisoft. And secondly, like 26 million others with a mobile phone, he'd been wowed by *Monument Valley* – the mesmeric, Escher-like puzzle game about manipulating miniature dioramas.

As it turned out, however, *Monument Valley* was the business of UsTwo's London office. Working in Malmö, Stålberg was stuck instead with a Play-Doh project – not the kind of snowglobe worldbuilding he'd hoped for.

Since going indie, Stålberg has made up for lost time – making a name for himself as a developer of exquisite, shrunken worlds which delight the players who look in on them. “I’ve always been fascinated by those kinds of things,” he says. “I’ve always liked looking at maps.” Since Google Earth came out 20 years ago, Stålberg has spent many happy hours flying around its facsimile planet, appreciating the geological and manmade patterns that can only be observed from a great height.

His first attempt to tap into that joy was, you might say, *Monument Valley*-esque: a maze game about picking a path across the procedurally generated rooftops of a tiny urban environment. “You were maybe going to be a cat jumping around,” he says. “Maybe delivering mail or something like that. But I didn’t manage to make that fun.”

Instead, Stålberg adapted the project to fill another need in his life – for smaller-scale strategy games. “I think it’s an ageing thing,” he says. “You lose some abilities with age, and you don’t have that much time to practice. Now if I play strategy games, it’s too stressful to keep track of everything at once and fly around the map when things are happening

all over the place. So a diorama is a way to make a very graspable environment that’s easy to understand.”

The resulting game, *Bad North*, hints at the messiness and deluge of a classic RTS. But since its maps can host no more than a handful of units at a time, there’s never too much to keep track of. Nor is there too little, thanks to the tactical complication created by Stålberg’s procedural generation. “It’s very spatial,” he says. “Reading the map in itself becomes part of the gameplay – figuring out its shape, the strong points and vulnerabilities.”

TOWN PLANNING

A Viking aesthetic appealed to Stålberg, both as a Swede and lover of minimalism. He considers *Bad North*’s simple palette an “overcompensation” for his time working on *The Division* at Ubisoft Massive. There, the slush-covered camouflage of early winter New York made enemies impossible to pick out, and the dev team spent a lot of time creating blinking, overt UI elements to help the player. *Bad North* sits at the opposite end of the spectrum, forefronting readable silhouettes and eschewing health bars entirely. “When people take random screenshots from my game, I want those screenshots to mostly look nice,” Stålberg says.

This principle of visual cleanliness saw *Bad North*’s follow-up, *Townscaper*, become a big hit on Twitter long before it came out – winning over followers with its brightly coloured Scandi cityscapes, set against a big blue sky and endless ocean. The trick this time was to hand the environmental generation over to the player – letting them plonk down chunks of building, and watch with satisfaction as Stålberg’s tech filled in the details with benches, beaches, gardens and tourist telescopes.

The temptation was to plonk a traditional game on top of this simple tool – perhaps a city-building simulation. But Stålberg’s first child was on the way, and so he resisted. “I might make a game like that at some point, but those are a huge amount of work,” he says. “It would be at least ten times the amount of resources. What if I could get away with not having any of that?”

It transpires there’s actually a broad and pretty under-served audience just waiting for a toy, rather than a challenge. Today, *Townscaper* is beloved by both the very young and very old. “I didn’t even really expect *Townscaper* to be financially worth it,” Stålberg says. “But it was very successful.”

The surprise has taught him an important lesson for future projects: always make a sandbox mode. “If the sandbox mode is decent, people will buy it just for that.” ■

Jeremy Peel

TO DIE FOR

It’s time for a diorama ‘did you know?’



1 San Francisco’s Ferry Building hosted a model of the state of California, put together for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition.

2 Grown-ups who collaborate to build Lego dioramas are sometimes called AFOLs – Adult Fans of Lego.

3 One of the earliest recorded diorama displays took up three floors of Stockholm’s Biological Museum in 1893.

“READING THE MAP
IN ITSELF BECOMES
PART OF THE
GAMEPLAY”



ABOVE: Like *Bioshock Infinite*'s Columbia, minus the white supremacy.

FAR LEFT: Boats bring your enemies in, but can also offer an escape route in a pinch.



DNA Tracing

ANCESTRIES EXPLORED

**OF COURSE, NO
LARIAN STORY
BEGINS WITH
GODHOOD**

BALD DECISIONS

How **LARIAN** broke out of the B-tier to master the Western RPG

When Larian boss Swen Vincke first heard that his debut RPG was going to be called *Divine Divinity*, he thought it was a joke. But his publisher in Germany, CDV, was all too serious. They'd had a hit with a game called *Sudden Strike*, and suspected that alliteration might be the key to long-term success. Reader, they were wrong.

Today, CDV is long dead. But the name 'Divinity' remains – attached to almost every Larian project of note since. It's an artefact from a long and gruelling period in which the studio was subject to the whims of whoever held the purse strings. An inescapable reminder of the outside interference which the developer has now triumphantly expunged.

Of course, no Larian story begins with godhood. Getting there can be a slow, strategic, and sometimes bruising journey, and so it proved for the studio itself. Along the road to release, *Divine Divinity* was compromised not just by CDV, but the publisher before it, Atari. Larian should have been following in the wake of *Baldur's Gate*, its spiritual kin; instead, the studio's paymasters directed it to copy *Diablo*, the leading light in the adjacent action-RPG genre.

The result was an identity crisis viewed from an isometric perspective. On the one hand, *Divine Divinity* boasted the intricacy and interactivity of Vincke's beloved *Ultima VII*. In its world, every crate and barrel could be shunted around with the mouse, and every kitchen table relieved of its cutlery. Yet outside the alluring density of civilisation, the game devolved into long and testing dungeons, which leaned heavily on simplistic hack-and-slash combat. The fact that the screens seemed to roll on forever – unfurling a near-continuous tapestry rather than the discrete patchwork of the Infinity Engine games – only contributed to the sense that *Divine Divinity* was stretched thin. To quote Bilbo Baggins, it was like butter scraped over too much bread.

BELOW: Swen Vincke "always regretted making" *Beyond Divinity*, an unambitious sequel.

DIVINE TRAGEDY

Nevertheless, it reviewed well. Launched during a CRPG drought in 2002, *Divine Divinity* won over a dehydrated hardcore, and justified a follow-up in the same style: *Beyond Divinity*. Yet the landscape was already changing

beneath Larian's feet. With *Knights of the Old Republic*, BioWare had graduated to 3D games for a console audience, and pulled the entire RPG genre along with it. If Larian was to stand any chance of attracting publisher money, it had no choice but to follow.

Divinity II: Ego Draconis was exactly what an RPG was required to be in 2009: a fully voice-acted adventure in a shiny, sun-dappled land that was easily navigable via an Xbox 360 controller. To stand out from the crowd, Larian developed not one but two gimmicks: NPC mind-reading and the ability to dogfight in dragon form. But without BioWare's budget, *Ego Draconis* belonged firmly in the B-tier, alongside other European efforts like *Risen*, *Two Worlds* and a slightly muddled Polish novel adaptation of something called *The Witcher*.

Despite its best efforts, Larian hadn't tempted new RPG converts away from *Fallout 3* and *Fable*. And in the pursuit of 3D fidelity, it had sacrificed much of the granular interactivity that had made *Ultima VII* so engrossing for a young Vincke.

"I lost track a bit," the CEO wrote in a 2012 blog post. "The joys of console development steered *Divinity II* far away from the original idea, and so many compromises were made in that game that what shipped was but a shadow of what I had envisioned it to be. In truth there are only a few gameplay moments in there that come close to the reason I set up this company."

HIGH KICK

As an overbloomed sun set on the noughties, Larian seemed doomed to repeat this unfulfilling cycle – chasing genre leaders at the behest of its publishers, and at the expense of its own vision for the future of the Western RPG. But something changed, and that something was Kickstarter: a lightning rod for the

ORIGINAL SINS

The Larian games you don't hear about



LED WARS

When everyone was making an RTS, Larian decided to do the same. *LED Wars* was built in the evenings, with the days reserved for RPG development.



KETNET KICK

A platformer built for a children's TV channel in Belgium, which somehow evokes *Spyro*, *Frogger*, *Pac-Man*, and *SSX* all at the same time.



ADVENTURE ROCK

An online open world for kids, made with the backing of the BBC. Players collected pages of a book, for some unknown purpose.



ROLLING STONE

The road to Baldur's Gate



DIVINE DIVINITY
Ultima meets Diablo. They don't get on.



BEYOND DIVINITY
More of the same, with diminishing returns.



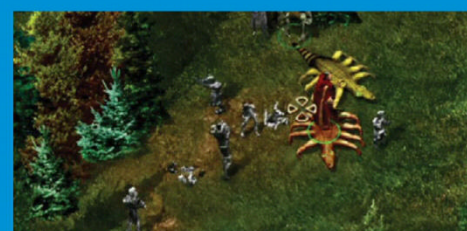
DIVINITY II: EGO DRACONIS
Went 3D, but couldn't rival BioWare.



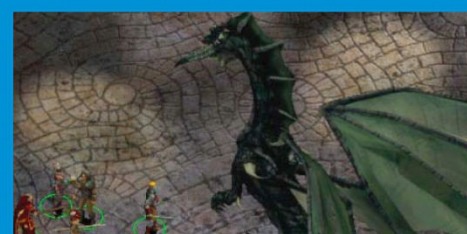
DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN
A return to isometric fundamentals.



DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II
The Ultima-te RPG.



BALDUR'S GATE
Real-time D&D.



BALDUR'S GATE II
Dragon Age wishes it was this good.



DIVINITY: DRAGON COMMANDER
Bizarre strategic spin-off.



DIVINITY: FALLEN HEROES
Tactics battler, sadly cancelled.



BALDUR'S GATE III
Larian wins a much-coveted licence.

KEY

- Larian Studios
- BioWare
- Logic Artists

» revival of the classic CRPG. The same movement Larian had just missed out on a decade earlier.

To the public, Larian pitched *Divinity: Original Sin* – appropriately named, since it was more or less the game Vincke had been attempting to make since the very beginning. Back was the isometric perspective, and the tactile connection to the world of Rivellon – an intricate creation you could pull apart with lockpicks and fireballs to discover its secrets. Returning, too, were those continuous maps – now backed by a sense of purpose. With a little ingenuity, you could engineer solutions to your problems using tools designed for other quests halfway across the level, rather like a *Deus Ex* or *Dishonored* player might.

Yet the wisest design decision came midway through production. Vincke was in the shower when he realised that, even though Larian was independent, it was still listening to the ghosts of publishers past. “What are we doing? We’re making a real-time game because they told us,” he thought, and later recounted to Gamer Informer. “We’re gonna be competing with Blizzard making an action RPG? We can’t compete with Blizzard, we don’t have the resources.”

BREAK FREE

Rather than make its *Diablo* mistake all over again, Larian turned *Original Sin* into a turn-based tactics masterclass. It struck a chord, topping Steam’s sales chart upon release in 2014 – before its sequel repeated the feat in 2017. Over the same period, Larian has become an experienced self-publisher, partnering only with companies who already love what the studio is doing, and aren’t seeking to alter it.

“WE CAN’T COMPETE WITH BLIZZARD, WE DON’T HAVE THE RESOURCES”

Now, finally, Larian gets to join BioWare’s lineage by developing an official follow-up to *Baldur’s Gate*, the

quintessential CRPG. The Forgotten Realms is a perfect home for the studio; like Rivellon, D&D’s favourite setting is malleable by design, a blank canvas on which to scrawl scenarios and draw entertaining characters.

None of which is to say that Larian couldn’t adapt its talents to a more specific fantasy world if required. But a recurring theme in the studio’s work is the prisoner who, growing in power, breaks free of their shackles. Perhaps it’s had enough

restrictions for one lifetime. ■

Jeremy Peel

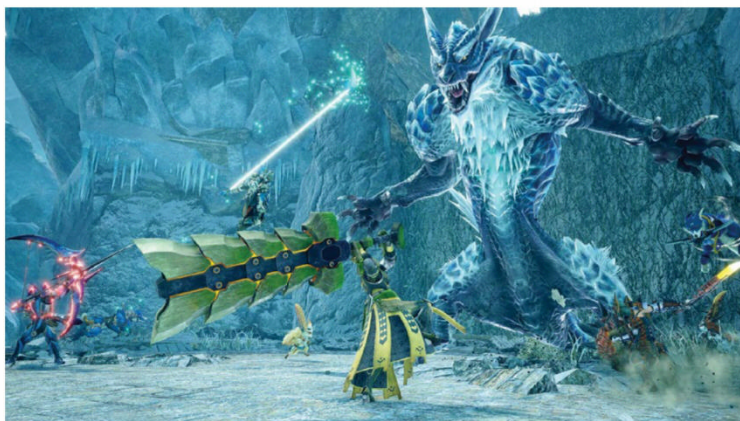


ABOVE: The initial design for *Divinity II* had you flying and landing your dragon anywhere.

BELOW: The interplay of elemental effects is a central part of *Divinity’s* combat.



1 month



MONSTER HUNTER RISE: SUNBREAK

RELEASE June 30 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

Set sail for new shores that coincidentally are just as plagued with giant monsters in this expansion for the latest entry in Capcom's unique action-RPG series.



CUPHEAD: THE DELICIOUS LAST COURSE

RELEASE June 30 | **DEVELOPER** Studio MDHR

The brutal platformer's long-awaited DLC finally arrives, promising even more impossible bosses to fight, as well as a new playable character: Ms Chalice.



F1 22

RELEASE July 1 | **DEVELOPER** Codemasters

The official videogame of the popular sport where the cars go very fast, complete with a full career mode, a revamped system for driver AI, and more.

3 months



DIGIMON SURVIVE

RELEASE July 29 | **DEVELOPER** HYDE

Launching to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the original anime, this game combines visual novel-style storytelling with turn-based tactical monster battles.



TWO POINT CAMPUS

RELEASE August 9 | **DEVELOPER** Two Point Studios

Another Bullfrog-aping, light-hearted management sim from the creators of *Two Point Hospital*, this time putting you in charge of a surreal college, with classes including 'knight school'.



SAINTS ROW

RELEASE August 23 | **DEVELOPER** Volition

After recent entries escalated to alien invasions, virtual worlds, and a trip to actual Hell, this reboot is bringing things back down to earth with a new cast of trendy criminal hipsters.

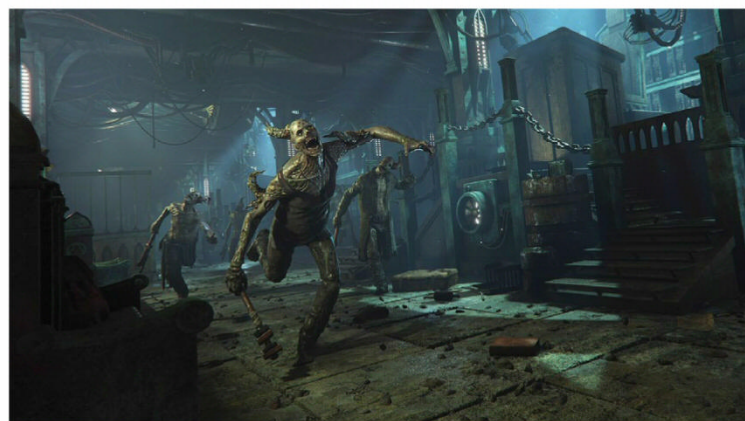
6 months



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

RELEASE September 1 | **DEVELOPER** Daedalic Entertainment

LOTR's scrawniest little monster stars in his very own game, sneaking, climbing, and platforming his way through Mordor while he tries to keep his two personalities in check.



WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

RELEASE September 13 | **DEVELOPER** Fatshark

A follow-up to modern co-op classic *Vermintide 2* that moves the action to the grim darkness of the far future, where you'll battle an insidious, disease-worshipping cult.

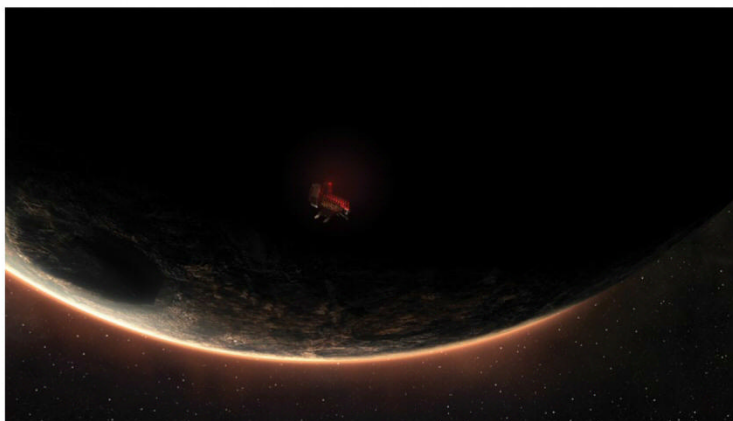


CLASH: ARTIFACTS OF CHAOS

RELEASE November | **DEVELOPER** ACE Team

A third-person brawler follow-up to the wonderfully bizarre *Zeno Clash* games, starring a mutant warrior fighting to protect a cute little furry... thing from harm.

12 months+



RELEASE January 27, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Motive Studios

DEAD SPACE

A full remake of the beloved survival horror game, sticking to the basic plot and structure of the original but otherwise rebuilding it from the ground up.



STARFIELD

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

It sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new single-player RPG – but if 'Skyrim in space' can pull off its grand ambitions, it'll be worth the wait.



SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios

The long-awaited follow-up to the *Batman: Arkham* series, starring Harley Quinn and other super-villains forced to fight evil versions of Superman, The Flash, and more.

CANCELLED

MMO NO MORE

The Marvel MMO that was under development by Daybreak Games (the studio behind *DC Universe Online*) has been cancelled, according to a recent earnings call.





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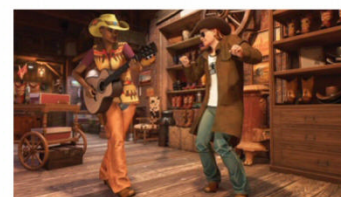
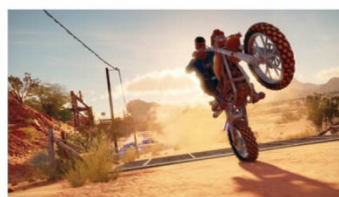
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PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 23**DEVELOPER**
Volition**PUBLISHER**
Deep Silver**LINK**
saintsrow.com

SAINTS ROW

A more grounded take, but don't worry: it's still extremely silly

The boss of the Saints is speeding through Santo Ileso, utterly disregarding numerous laws of the road. There's the usual reckless driving and ignoring traffic lights, of course, but more notable is what she's dragging along behind her car: a portalo. An occupied portalo at that.

She's softening up the unfortunate crook inside the loo so she can find out where his pals are holding a member of her gang. They were meant to be enjoying an evening of telenovelas, but he went and got himself kidnapped by the Idols, one of the Saints' rivals. And while this is a scripted mission, the winch is something you can attach to most vehicles outside of this scenario. Choppers can similarly pick stuff up and fly off with it. If *Just Cause* has taught us anything, it's that tethering stuff to vehicles always leads to hilarity.

Volition has made it clear that with a new gang comes a change in tone, as well as a more considered approach to your inner circle and the relationships you develop with them. There's more than a hint of *Fast & Furious*' obsession with family, and like that series there is some straight-faced sincerity amid the wingsuit stunts – you can bounce off pedestrians to get more air – and explosive heists. So it's still a farce, but one with emotional grounding and internal logic.

"It doesn't matter how absurd a thing is if it has an emotional truth underneath it," says lead mission writer Jeremy

Bernstein. "That final mission [in the demo], Kevin's missing, the Idols are gonna kill him, and that's serious, and it feels serious to you and it feels serious to the Boss, to the character that you're playing. So the things you do to rescue him, beating the guy's head against the jukebox and dragging him around in the porta-potty, those are absurdist, but the emotionality behind it, that grounding, that character drive, that's all very real. You're trying to find your friend. That gives you this great balance where you are doing absurd things, but it feels like it matters. Absurdism for the sake of absurdism, that's where everything feels fluffy and doesn't feel like anything really means anything."

We're not talking superheroes, aliens and trips to Hell, but the shenanigans still survive. Insurance Fraud, where you get tossed around like a ragdoll for a quick buck, is still here, as is Mayhem, letting you blow off some steam by blowing everything up. What grounded means for *Saints Row*, then, is not a dismissal of the antics that made it stand out from *GTA*, but an attempt to make it coherent.

NEW
INFO

JOB SEARCH

You can see this in how it presents its over-the-top activities. Things like Insurance Fraud and Mayhem are now connected to criminal ventures: businesses you open across the city in an attempt to take it over. From your war table in your customisable HQ, you can see the whole city and decide where to plonk down your new illicit businesses, in turn unlocking new activities and rewards.

So you get your "fun and wacky" situations, as systems designer Damien Allen puts it, but they still "make sense of this criminal empire". There's a point to the weird stuff you're doing. And there's more to do beyond these criminal ventures.

"There's other opportunities that aren't necessarily tied to a building that the Saints can get into," Allen says. "And they have just as much variety as the buildings as to what those activities are, focusing on different abilities and mechanics and things we have throughout the game. If you have a favourite thing to do, there's probably an activity that allows you to express that." >>

VOLITION HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT WITH A NEW GANG COMES A CHANGE IN TONE



» CRIMINAL OUTFIT

And that's far from the only way of expressing yourself. A liberating amount of customisation has always been *Saints Row's* deal, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that this remains true in the reboot. Volition released a trailer showcasing character customisation a wee while ago, and this time I got to see it in action as the developer switched between various versions of the Boss.

As well as being able to make plenty of cosmetic changes to your vehicles, there's also some handy practical enhancements, including an ejector seat that's perfect if you fancy switching from driving to gliding in your wingsuit, boosts that give you a nice rush of speed, and the aforementioned winch. This goes for weapons, too, so you can change their appearance or enhance them, like turning a regular pistol into a machine pistol. The big new feature, however, is being able to swap their look for that of another weapon. We got transmogs, baby!

"There are going to be some limitations," explains Kenzie Lindgren, associate UX designer, "But there's going to be a certain set of, let's say, melee weapons, and you have your starter... but if you don't like the look of it, you can go and change the visual effect that's on it."

It's another excuse to hit the shops or hunt down other opportunities for weapon rewards. And whether you're tweaking your Boss, your vehicle or your weapon "there's a lot of weird shit", Lindgren promises. She teases that there's a lot of fun stuff you can stick on food trucks specifically, and Allen adds that you can stick bits of cardboard on some of the cars "just because". I'm rather partial to the big foam fingers, which I'm sure I'll be using with the trasmog system a lot.

HOSTILE TAKEOVER

One thing Volition appears to be taking a bit more seriously this time are the shootouts. The previous games didn't offer a lot of structure to the fights, instead just giving you plenty of enemies to mop up with your increasingly devastating arsenal. The reboot's approach keeps the chaos, but foes seem like tougher customers, with more smarts

and abilities tied to their role and what gang they belong to, beyond just filling your soft body with lots of bullets.

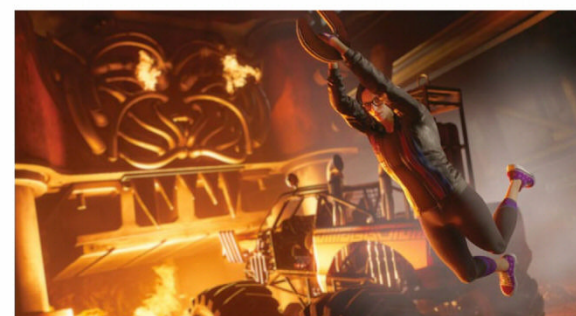
"[The gangs] each feel very unique," says Allen. "They each feel like you know when you're fighting Panteros, you know when you're fighting Marshalls and Idols. The way they arrive and what you need to fight them feels very different, so it gives more of a sense of a personality to each of the enemy factions and that your strategies need to change. You still have tons of weapons and tons of variety, and you can move and shoot, and shoot from the hip. But you have to think differently than you did in the past."

In attempting to show off the breadth of *Saints Row*, Volition doesn't offer much time to dig into the characters and clams up whenever any story questions are raised. It's hard to get a feel for them, then, and the sequences with the gang bantering are some of the weaker parts of the demo, where they used to be a highlight. I did enjoy the Boss and her pal being upset about missing their telenovela date, however, and one mission's climax puts one of your mates in the spotlight when she commandeers a monster truck, rams it into a furnace and destroys a factory. Commendable. I can see myself growing to like them, but right now I'm still mourning the old gang.

The old cliché of the city being part of the cast is alive and well, but at least with *Saints Row* it's a cliché Volition has earned the right to use, especially after the eccentric, lively cities of 3 and 4. Each district of Santo Ileso is meant to have its own vibe and NPCs, not just wandering the streets but getting into trouble with the law or just hanging out listening to a musical performance. Possibly from you. Of the 100 emotes you can bust out, you've got musical options, and ones that let you keep walking, so you can strut down the street while strumming your guitar as people dance and applaud. Around here this would inspire a mob to chase you and smash your instrument over your head, so this is a nice change.

Nothing in my demo really surprised me, which is strange for a reboot. But it did absolutely seem like *Saints Row*. It couldn't be any other game. That's fine with me – there isn't a *Saints Row* I don't like – and no doubt this will be good news for faithful fans. But any reinvention needs something bold and new to showcase the new direction, and *Saints Row* doesn't seem to have that yet.

Fraser Brown



THE OLD CLICHÉ OF THE CITY BEING PART OF THE CAST IS ALIVE AND WELL



ABOVE: With wingsuits and tethers, the game feels influenced by the chaos of *Just Cause*.

FAR LEFT: The Boss does not respect the Man.

PREVIEW

Disney Dreamlight Valley

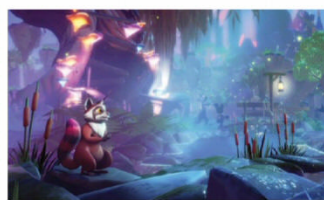


ABOVE: Oh boy! Looks like the valley's in trouble!

RIGHT: Let's go to the beach-each.



Disney Dreamlight Valley



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer

DEVELOPER
Gameloft

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
disneydreamlightvalley.com

DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY

It Disney get any better than this

Having grown up in the era of Disney's film renaissance, I am well versed in all things mouse. I know the songs by heart, have watched every animated movie, and have visited Disneyworld more times than an adult probably should. But what's never really jelled with me is Disney games – the last one I enjoyed was *Toy Story 2* for the PlayStation. Until now.

Disney Dreamlight Valley feels like a Disney game created just for me. It combines all the things I love most in games: life-sim, character customisation, narrative-driven stories, and very cute critters. There's faithful voice acting and music throughout, and many easter eggs for Disneyphiles to find. It's a Disney game made with millennials in mind, featuring beloved characters from the '90s films alongside modern favourites like Elsa and Moana.

After *Dreamlight Valley*'s mysterious ruler disappeared, the Forgetting began. Ghastly Night Thorns grew all over the land, and some of the valley's inhabitants retreated into the Dream Castle, with most losing their memories. It's up to you to restore the memories of its inhabitants.

There's no combat in *Dreamlight Valley* – rather your magic enables you to clear away the Night Thorns and complete quests via helping various characters. Assisting characters and completing their quests is also the way to unlock Royal Tools – such as the fishing rod and shovel

– which will help you on your way to saving the valley, as well as increasing your friendship level to unlock unique rewards.

Alongside an adventure-led main story, there are plenty of sidequests to complete. Some of the most interesting puzzles can be found behind the doors in the Dream Castle. Completing these puzzles by using your Royal Tools will unlock even more characters who will rejoin you in the valley.

The sandbox elements of *Dreamlight Valley* have you cooking, farming, collecting resources, and more. To unlock all the Royal Tools, you'll need to progress through the story and accept the quests from your new Disney friends. As you unlock more tools, you'll access more doors in the Dream Castle. Of course, the tools aren't just related to quests – you can use them in the sandbox, too.

SWEET DREAMS

The real gem of *Dreamlight Valley* is the landscaping. One key tenet of the game is self-expression, whether that's with a snazzy custom outfit or a total rearrangement of one of the map's themed zones. The aim isn't to become a Disney princess, but to express your love of Disney in your own way. You'll unlock the bulk of the furniture and props by completing quests and there are over 1,000 customisation options, so don't worry about becoming bored with your look.

Each character has their own agenda, making their feelings known towards the Night Thorns strewn across the land and engaging in activities they enjoy, like fishing. You can even make friends with the animals found in each new area and, once tamed, they'll follow you around. Don't pretend you don't want a horde of cute animals following you at all times.

Gameloft plans on updating *Dreamlight Valley* beyond its planned release in 2023, adding more adventures and items. Better still, it'll be free-to-play at launch. Having the choice to solve some puzzles, decorate my house and go off on a quest sets it apart from its life-sim counterparts. If you've fallen out of love with *Animal Crossing* and the like, you'll be as obsessed with *Dreamlight Valley* as I was with *We Don't Talk About Bruno*.

Lauren Aitken

FIRST LOOK

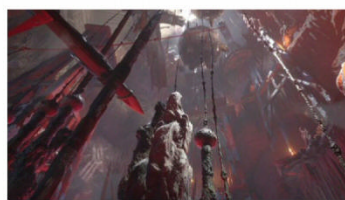
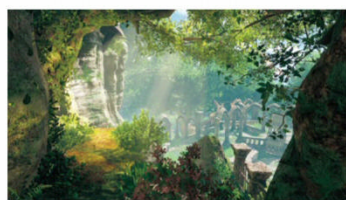


It won't cost much, just your voice!

AFTER DREAMLIGHT VALLEY'S RULER DISAPPEARED, THE FORGETTING BEGAN

PREVIEW

The Lord of the Rings: Gollum



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Autumn

DEVELOPER
Daedalic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house, Nacon

LINK
bit.ly/3tdzHuT

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

A stealth adventure with an identity crisis

The *Lord of the Rings: Gollum* seems to share its titular character's split personality. In a 20-minute remote preview, I got to see the Gollum: contextual stealth takedowns, ledge shimmying, and 'Gollum vision', but also the Smeagol: an open-ended, combat-free platforming puzzle. Which one will win out is hard to say.

The demo begins in one of the game's two primary locations: Mordor. I was a bit uncertain before the demo at how well this grey and red hellscape could carry half of a game, but Daedalic's done a decent job injecting more colour: some yellow sulphur and even a bit of greenery that differentiates its Mordor from Peter Jackson's portrayal.

The Mordor gameplay mostly covers the tutorial, so it's possible the stealth system could have more tricks up its sleeve, but I'm unmoved so far. On approach to an orc fortress, Gollum activates Gollum Vision to highlight enemies, a feature familiar to anyone who's played a triple-A game in the past ten years. Gollum scurries from cover to cover, climbs up a high ledge to avoid a guardpost, and kills an orcish sentry with a quick stealth takedown.

It all gives me an impression of a fully standardised, triple-A form of stealth-action gameplay, and I don't have particularly high hopes for this aspect of the game. The Mordor portion concludes with the reveal of Gollum vs Smeagol moral choices. I don't know if there's an

explicit morality meter, but *LotR: Gollum* does track these choices and it will have an effect on story beats.

But to what end? The presenters also confirmed that the main plot points of the game are set in stone, the curse of prequels everywhere, raising unfortunate questions of how *Gollum* justifies itself. I'm not sold on the awful little hobbit's 'star power', as it were. As iconic as Andy Serkis' portrayal was, even that interpretation wouldn't make for a compelling lead for an entire game, and this isn't Andy Serkis we're talking about here – just a decent impersonation. The presenters cite Gollum and Smeagol's crosstalk as a way to fill silence during gameplay and more organically deliver the sort of, "Hmm, I guess this is where I go next," barks we've come to expect from our chatty videogame protagonists, but the schtick is already wearing on me by the mid-point of the presentation.

SILVER LININGS

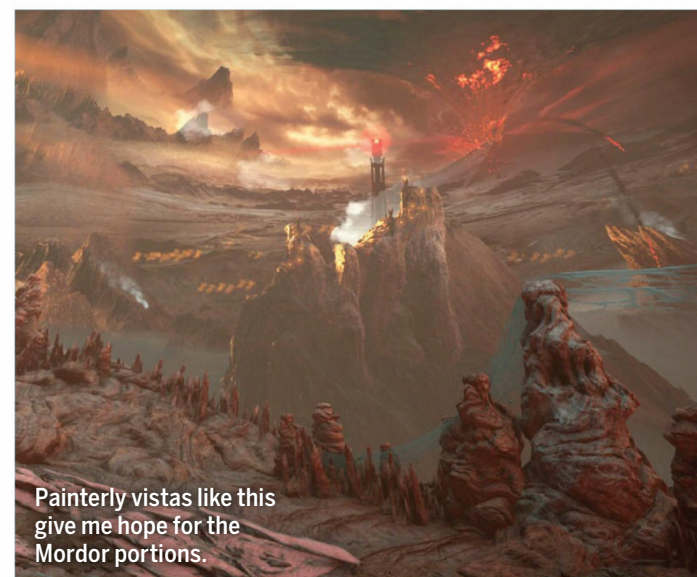
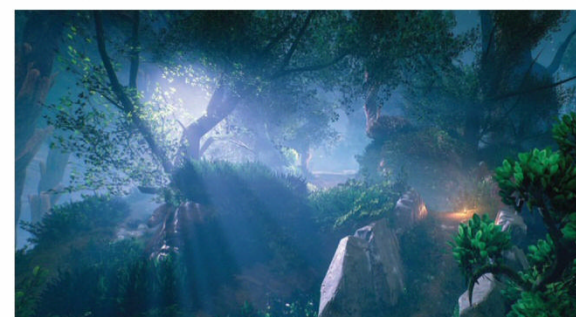
The second portion of the demo is a bit more promising. The court of Thranduil forms the other primary setting for the game, and I'm pretty taken with its look, something halfway between the elven environments of Peter Jackson's movies and the Dreaming City from *Destiny 2*.

This portion also doesn't have any enemy characters, instead showing Gollum navigating the elf king's empty bedchamber. It's the sort of open-ended platforming puzzle I really enjoyed in *Prince of Persia: the Sands of Time*, with the player being left to chart a path through a cavernous fantasy obstacle course. Gollum has to climb to the heights of the massive chamber, jumping from handholds on a moving orrery high above the floor. This part of the *Gollum* demo stirs something in me, striking me as a game I might actually want to play.

And then the demo ends. After years of just existing as a name and pre-rendered concept footage, *Gollum*'s first look was divided between visions of an uninspired stealth-action game and an intriguing throwback platformer. It's difficult to tell which way the final game is going to lean, but I come away from its public reveal unenthused.

Ted Litchfield

A FULLY STANDARDISED, TRIPLE-A FORM OF STEALTH-ACTION GAMEPLAY



Painterly vistas like this give me hope for the Mordor portions.

The Lord of the Rings: Gollum



ABOVE: I'm still not sold on *Gollum's* stealth gameplay.

LEFT: I'm always a sucker for overgrown elven ruins.

PREVIEW

Gerda: A Flame in Winter

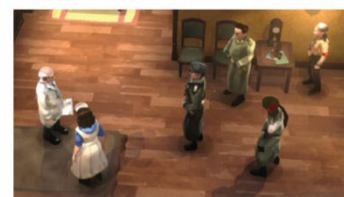


ABOVE: Gerda works as a nurse in her small town.

RIGHT: Tense conversations are common.



Gerda: A Flame in Winter



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 1

DEVELOPER
PortaPlay Gaming Aps

PUBLISHER
DONTNOD Entertainment

LINK
bit.ly/3Q2u0yz

GERDA: A FLAME IN WINTER

An important story muddled by numbers

This WWII adventure game has arrived at a strange time. While the Ukraine-Russia conflict continues, it serves to reinforce that Europe is not immune to tragic and brutal conflict – and, in fact, it wasn't that long ago that the world suffered through two World Wars.

Gerda: A Flame in Winter is the story of an ordinary person trying their best when war surrounds them, how conflict on a global scale affects the people attempting to live their day-to-day lives. You play the eponymous Gerda, a half-German, half-Danish nurse living on the Danish border between the two countries. This area is occupied by the Nazis. Your relationships become complicated as you're married to a Dane, but your father joins the Nazi party in the hope that supporting its politics leads to unity between Germany and Denmark.

Gerda finds herself in a difficult position between these two parts of her life. She supports the independence of her small town, and the Danish people. But through the game you can show kindness and sympathy to German soldiers or try to support your father despite his allegiance. Doing so, though, comes at a cost. Everything, and I mean everything, comes at a cost.

DIPLO-MATH-CY

The main gameplay in *Gerda* involves conversations directly influenced by numbered stats. You have Gerda's Compassion, Wit, and Insight ratings, her

personal trust levels with individual people, and then her affiliation with the Danish and Germans. Years ago I played *Valiant Hearts*, a game set during WWI, which acted as a history lesson as much as it did an engaging point-and-click adventure. There were no major choices in *Valiant Hearts*; it was just a story and an insight into the lives of people trying to fight, survive, and aid war efforts. These stats in *Gerda* on the other hand require you to overthink every conversation, which I think may detract from the overall message of the game.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Even just in the demo I find myself having to make so many small choices that I become resigned to hurting the feelings of one person over another at every corner. Whether you're talking to a group of Germans or Danes, they'll always have different motives and opinions, which means every choice is a hard one. Or, as it may be, someone walks past as you have that conversation and your affiliation statistics are hurt instead. It becomes a practice in balancing the numbers on the right side of your screen more than it's about Gerda and leading her down a path you're proud of. Every choice could be a life or death situation in war-time

Denmark, but already those choices feel too mechanical, and when things don't work out as you expected it's frustrating rather than affecting.

That blow is certainly softened by absolutely beautiful backdrops. A storybook style suits the wintry scenery perfectly. Camera movements are occasionally jarring, but the game has a real charm to it. I quickly warmed to the characters, sympathised with their hardships, and took solace in the little acts of kindness peppered into the game.

The story of *Gerda: A Flame in Winter* is no doubt an important one. It shows off a side of war we're not often exposed to: how people have to navigate small communities and family relationships drastically changed by the choices of far-away politicians. Whether the game will execute that story in the most elegant way is another matter, but I'm intrigued to see the final product this September.

Imogen Mellor



EVERY CHOICE COULD BE A LIFE OR DEATH SITUATION IN WAR-TIME DENMARK

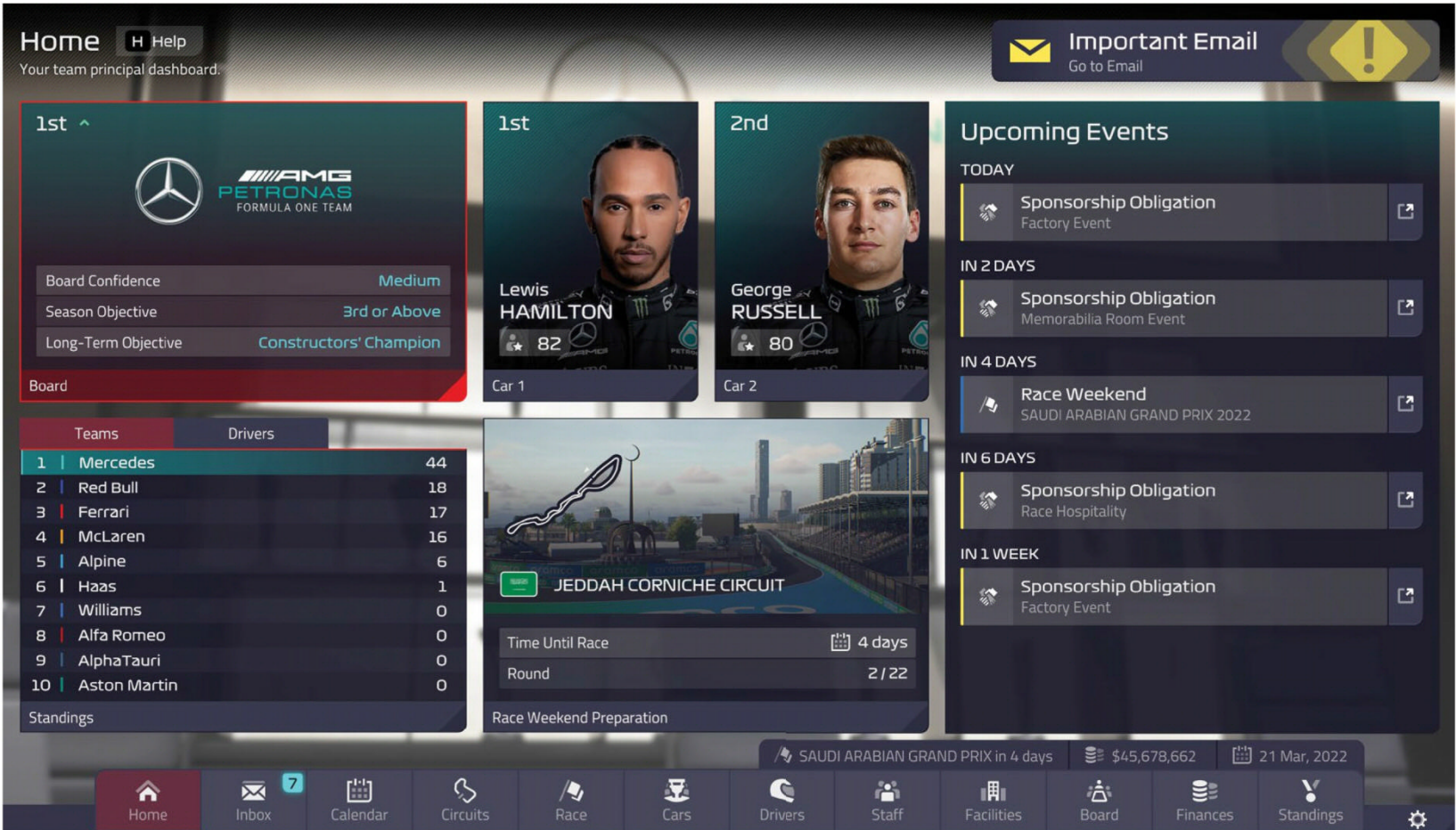
PREVIEW

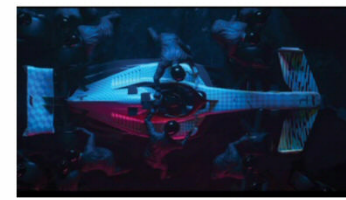
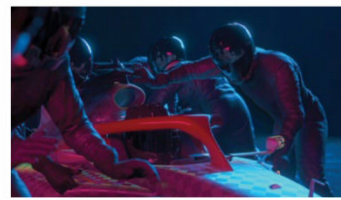
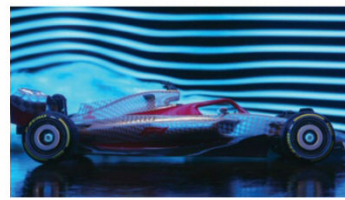
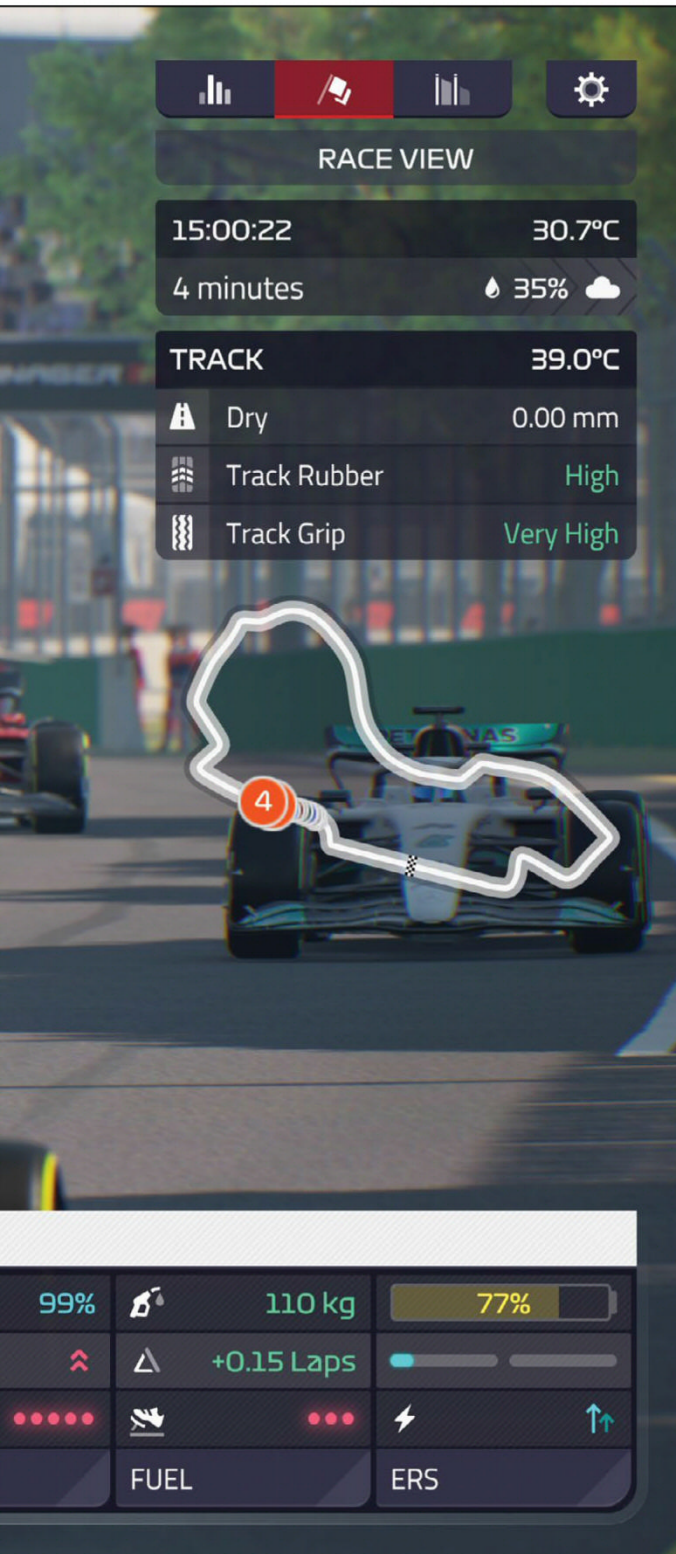
F1 Manager 22



ABOVE: If you're an F1 fan, you'll quickly get lost in the minutiae.

RIGHT: The level of granularity is both intimidating and impressive.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 25

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
f1manager.com

F1 MANAGER 22

An irresistible chance to undo Binotto's mistakes

What Ferrari wouldn't do for a pause button this season. Each race, Leclerc and Sainz start from the front of the grid and demonstrate a pace advantage over everyone else for about 20 laps... and then suffer a new variety of disaster. The only throughline between these upsets is that the people in pit lane wish they'd done the last five minutes differently.

That's what *F1 Manager 22* offers – the experience of being a team principal in motorsport's most prestigious category, with all the pressure and poring over technical minutiae that comes with it – and a pause button.

Going hands on with *F1 Manager 22*, what's striking is not just how advantageous the pause button is, but how real-world time melts away while you deliberate over tyre compounds. I wouldn't dream of whacking the race distance up to 100% in Codemasters' *F1* games, but here it didn't even occur to me to speed up time and condense the race.

That comes down to what's actually being asked of you in the two games. In *F1 22*, you're driving laps within a few tenths of each other for an hour and a half. Here you're clicking away on the mouse like a *StarCraft* player, controlling the pace, engine mode, ERS deployment, and pit strategy of two drivers, lap by lap, corner by corner. You're watching how their tyres are degrading based on wear projections. You're considering strategy changes. It's a lot of clicking. And it's utterly engrossing.

PLAYED IT

My particular hands-on takes place at Baku, and filling in for Alpine team principal Otmar Szafnauer I set Ocon on an aggressive two-stop strategy, two lots of soft compound then one medium so he can gun it all race long. For Fernando Alonso, the wily old veteran starting two places behind him in P11, I set a one-stop, medium then hard, and pray for a safety car that lets both drivers leapfrog the field in a well-timed pit stop.

IN IN IN...

I get it, too. On lap 15 Yuki Tsunoda out-brakes himself going into turn one while battling with Zhou Guanyu and beaches his Alpha Tauri on the track. The safety car's out for four laps, giving me time to pit both drivers without having to double-stack them, and even enough time to work out a new strategy for Ocon.

That gives us a huge jump in track position – the rest of the pack elects not to pit under the safety car, so when they start to pit later from a compressed pack, we rise up to P4 and P7. The feeling is something between setting a fastest lap in *F1 2021* and securing a wily science victory in *Civilization*.

By the chequered flag, my inexperience shows. Despite the pause button I screwed both my drivers on strategy and took too much out of their tyres, so their last stints are an exercise in sinking through the field like a particularly aerodynamic pebble in a pond. P14 for Ocon and P11 for Alonso.

Quite a long time has passed while I've been watching graphs of tyre deg slowly trend downwards and manually adjusting ERS levels every lap. It's telling that Frontier's done a fine job, because I've lost track of it completely.

Between races, I suspect there's still some user interface refining to be done. Fitting newly manufactured parts to cars feels like it requires two or three sub-menus more than it should in the current build, and it's not the only important interaction hidden away in the menus.

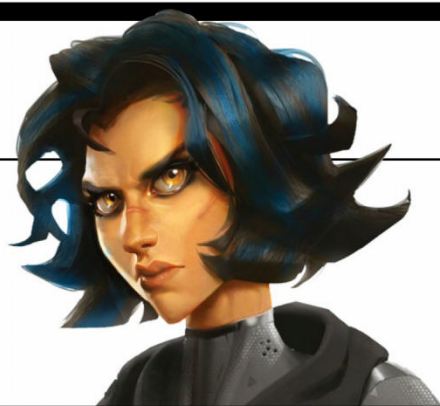
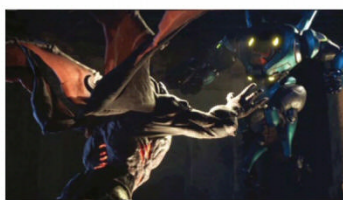
But that's not a big worry, this far out from release. What's important is that Frontier's found exactly where the interest and adrenaline are in motorsport's hardest job, and it's a job I'll quickly rack up hundreds of hours in.

Phil Iwaniuk

DESPITE THE PAUSE BUTTON I SCREWED BOTH MY DRIVERS ON STRATEGY



Stormgate



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

TBC (beta test in 2023)

DEVELOPER

Frost Giant

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

playstormgate.com

STORMGATE

StarCraft II's devs reunite to make the RTS of their dreams

There's a world in which *Stormgate* doesn't exist. In that world, Bizarro Blizzard decided that *StarCraft II* was worthy of a sequel pronto. But in this world, the key minds behind *StarCraft II* got tired of waiting for the chance to maybe, someday, make *StarCraft III*. So they stopped waiting, and started making *Stormgate* instead.

It's easy to see how *Stormgate* began life as the dream of a *StarCraft* that would never be. It's a humans vs aliens RTS set in the future, but with a splash of fantasy. It promises to deliver classic 1v1 battles for competitive veterans. But generic brand *StarCraft* this is not: after checking off some must-have features, *Stormgate*'s developer actually seems focused on convincing players the genre isn't washed up just yet.

"There's an opportunity to take RTS away from feeling like a solitary experience and into feeling like a more social experience," says Tim Morten, co-founder of Frost Giant and former production director on *StarCraft II*. Morten says that even when they added co-op to *StarCraft II*, players still often said the game felt lonely. "MOBAs, battle royale, even *Roblox*, these are social experiences, and RTS really had not kept up and evolved along that axis."

Campaigns will have co-op. *Stormgate*'s big new mode will be three player co-op, pitting players against AI with meta progression across matches. PvP multiplayer will have team-based

competitive modes that focus on objectives, rather than deathmatch.

A STORM BREWING

"To give a good team experience, we have to do something different in those modes than just simply have three different 1v1 matches going on in the same map," says Tim Campbell. "I think that's been a flaw of team-based modes in traditional RTSes: you feel like you're playing siloed matches in the same game session."

Campbell is Frost Giant's other Tim: he founded the studio along with Morten and was the campaign lead on *Warcraft III*. *Stormgate* began life as a series of coffee shop chats between the two Tims a few years ago; eventually their pent-up ideas for a new RTS could no longer be contained. Morten says that "there were so many clear opportunities to capitalize on the learnings that we got coming off the latter years of *StarCraft II*... I was really excited to see what we could do with that."

If any other indie studio had pitched me *Stormgate*, I'd call it impossibly ambitious. It's a small team building an RTS in the high fidelity Unreal Engine 5, trying to do campaigns, PvE co-op, and team-based multiplayer, classic 1v1 deathmatch with built-in esports tools, and multiple races with their own unique playstyles. Oh, and did I

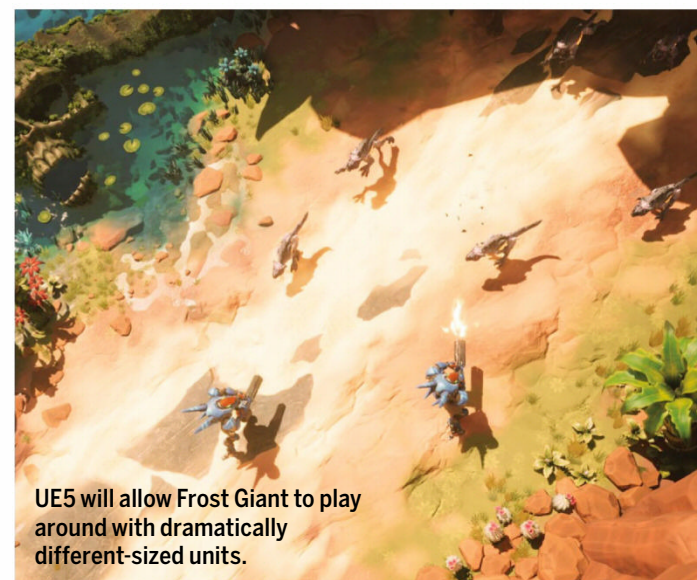
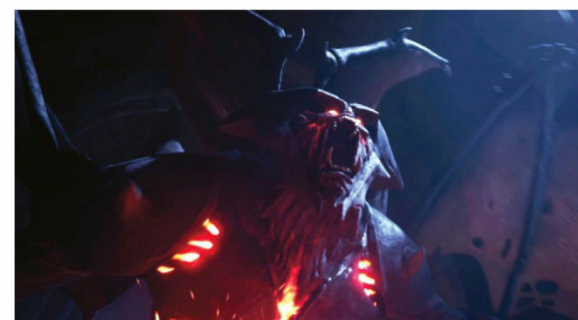
mention an editor? Yeah, in classic Blizzard fashion, it's doing that too, planning to hand their development tools over to the community to build their own levels.

It's a lot. Maybe too much. But these are proven veterans – and they've got a practical plan for how to get *Stormgate* in players' hands next year. It'll start with a closed beta in 2023, then launch on Steam with an episodic model, which will let them expand the story and setting over time. And it'll be free-to-play, a key choice for any RTS trying to grab a new generation of players.

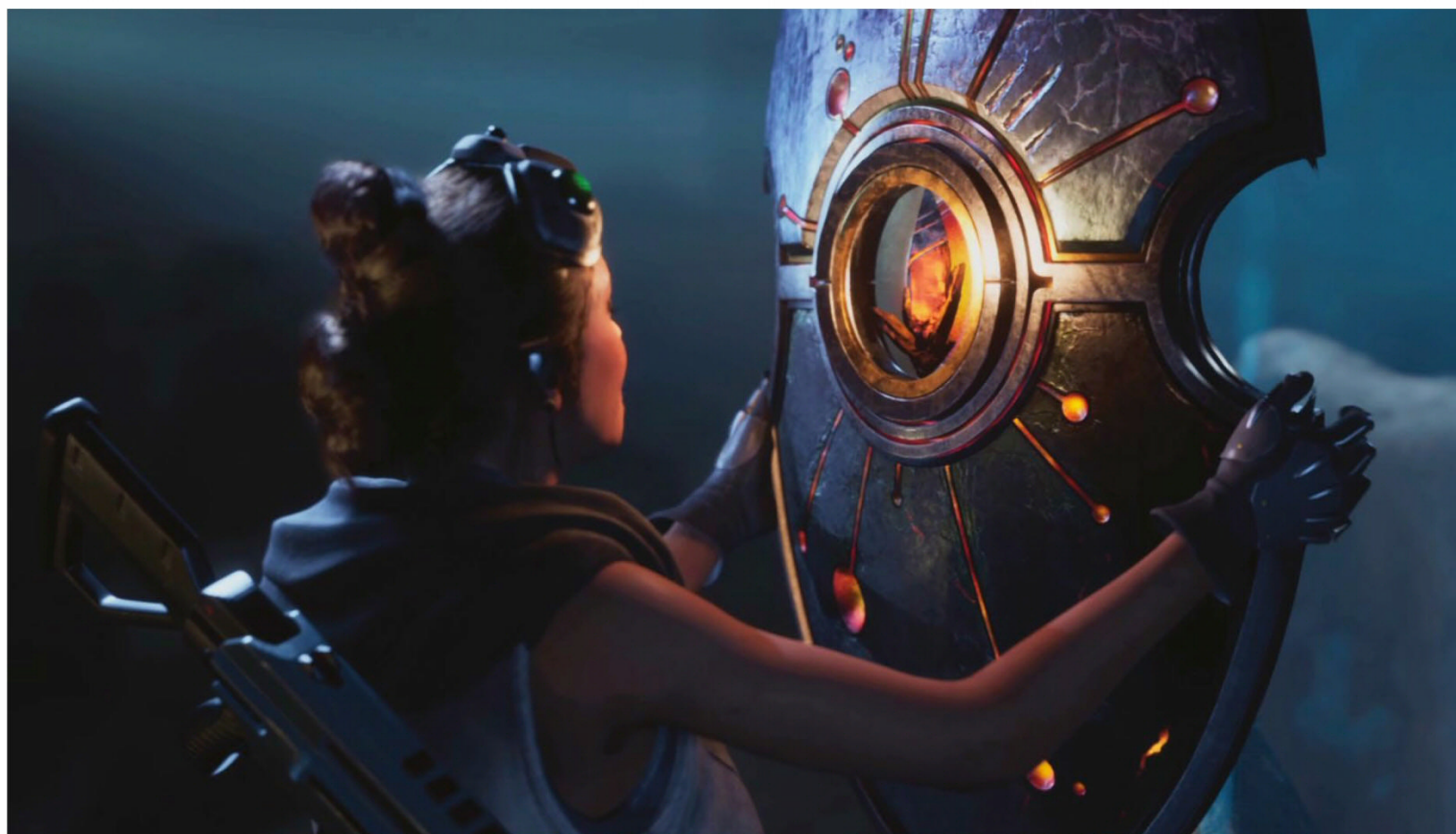
"I think the genre does well with providing a lot of room for players to master and improve their skill, but all of that depth can also feel daunting to a new player who's just stepping in," Campbell says. "We think we can really lean into that depth of experience, but improve around it."

Wes Fenlon

STORMGATE'S BIG NEW MODE WILL BE THREE PLAYER CO-OP, PITTING PLAYERS AGAINST AI



UE5 will allow Frost Giant to play around with dramatically different-sized units.



ABOVE: Are there mechs? You're damn right there are mechs.

LEFT: Expect *StarCraft*'s storytelling via characters to continue in some form here.

V Rising



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Stunlock Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
playvrising.com

V RISING

Build, battle, and bite in this vampiric survival game

Scavenge scraps from your surroundings. Hunt local fauna to keep yourself alive. Construct a shack to protect yourself from the elements. Fashion weapons from sticks and stones. Hide from the sunlight. Sleep in an ornate coffin. Drain the blood of the innocents. You know, standard survival game stuff.

Food and drink mean little to a vampire, so despite the traditional trappings of its genre, breakout hit *V Rising* offers no hunger or thirst meters. Instead, it's your need for blood that checks off that particular survival staple. Every time you feed, you'll drain your prey dry while filling up your own Blood Pool, which decays gradually over time, or significantly faster while using some of your special vampiric powers. Run out of the red stuff and you'll eventually starve to (un)death.

More than just a simple stand-in for genre staples, however, blood also affects the ways you move through the world, and particularly through combat. Each blood type offers its own bonuses – drinking from any animal makes it easier to get around by boosting speed. Draining a rogue-type human offers bonus crit chance, while scholars raise your magic.

The absolute strongest specimens boost all of your unlocked bonuses by a third, but they're more valuable as your thralls. Using your powerful vampire glare to recruit servants allows you to send them out to do your dark bidding, and the better their blood, the more likely they are

to succeed at their tasks. The idea of an army of vampiric drones definitely suits the setting, and having a bunch of vampiric goons wandering the castle is amusing, but it feels like there's room to expand on the idea of an army of thralls, especially around the more complex fights in more populous parts of the map.

That does, however, mean that you get to enjoy the bulk of the battle. That's excellent news, because *V Rising's* combat is arguably the highlight of the entire game. Fights are a concoction of finely-threaded skillshots and weapon abilities woven between last-moment dashes. Boss fights can be punishing, even in co-op groups, but fights really shine when you're out wandering the world. There's a fascinatingly thin line between predator and prey, and as skirmishes spread out and pull in different groups of wandering guards or a nearby pack of wild animals, dancing your way through the chaos is a genuine ballet.

BLOODY GOOD

Its meteoric rise appears to suggest that *V Rising* has breezed past many of the perils of Early Access. Resources and combat are intelligently gated, ensuring that progression doesn't feel like a simple case of grinding for the next most-powerful set of gear.

An exhaustive array of items and bosses makes for an experience that pulls you back and forth across its map rather than simply corralling you towards the next item on a checklist. Robust multiplayer offerings and a setting that seems almost tailor-made for dedicated RP servers further disperse the critical path.

Whether that's enough to keep players around through the planned year-long Early Access period is anyone's guess, not least because we've seen a lot of this before; development of *Valheim* – last year's breakout Early Access survival hit – was stopped in its tracks as an almost direct result of its insatiable and unexpected audience. In both its folkloric setting and its surprise ascent up Steam's top sellers list, *V Rising's* story is pretty similar so far, but perhaps Stunlock's previous multiplayer stumbling blocks will be enough to get its latest effort successfully over the line.

Alistair Jones

DANCING YOUR WAY THROUGH THE CHAOS IS A GENUINE BALLET



The lesser-known 'vampire horse'.



ABOVE: Resource machines can get pretty monstrous.

LEFT: Combat skews strongly towards skillshots.

FRENEMIES WITHIN

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS defies every expectation an XCOM player could have.

By Tyler Wilde

A

According to creative director Jake Solomon, *Marvel's Midnight Suns* is "the complete opposite" of *XCOM 2*, which is a preposterous claim. How can one turn-based tactics game be the opposite of another? And yet after hearing Solomon's explanation and playing a few hours of *Midnight Suns* during a visit to 2K's headquarters, I have a hard time disagreeing. *Midnight Suns* kind of is the opposite of *XCOM*.

At the very least, it's the version of *XCOM* where you declared that it's Opposite Day and started rewriting its rules, which is something I can imagine Solomon actually doing.

It's also a surprising game from a studio best known for 20 years of *Civilization* sequels and the stories that emerge from *XCOM*'s dice rolls and permadeath. Firaxis toyed with more authored storytelling in *XCOM 2* spin-off *Chimera Squad*, but this time it's gone full BioWare. *Midnight Suns* takes about 60 hours to complete, according to Solomon, and when you're not battling demon-possessed Hydra members, you're





COVER FEATURE

Marvel's Midnight Suns

➤ customising bedroom decor, attending movie nights, and processing your feelings with the X-Men, Avengers, and other heroes of the Midnight Suns, a superhero team based on the Midnight Sons run of comics from the early '90s.

"It's the first RPG that my team and I have ever made," says Solomon, who's been making games at Firaxis for 22 years now. "So, you know, doing something for the first time: guaranteed recipe for smooth sailing. It's been equal parts exciting and terrifying."

MULTIVERSE INCURSION

One thing that might have been quite scary for Solomon was watching Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness in the theatre.

Midnight Suns goes hard on the occult theme, which Solomon originally thought would set it apart from the movies of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. At the time, the films were dealing with space aliens, not ancient tomes of evil magic. How could Solomon have known that the world's foremost fan of ancient tomes of evil magic was going to end up directing an upcoming MCU movie?

Sam Raimi's film is all about the Darkhold spellbook, which also features prominently in *Midnight Suns*, and that was genuinely a surprise for Solomon. There was "no collaboration" there, he says,

and yet the movie and game overlap in other ways, too.

"Hero or villain? Is she a hero or villain?" Solomon asks as he flips between slides of the good and evil versions of Scarlet Witch that appear in *Midnight Suns*. "Someone should make a movie out of that!"

He's joking – mostly. I think Solomon legitimately wanted to be the first to dip back into Marvel's '80s and '90s occult material, but he knew someone else was going to do it eventually. And despite the similarities, *Midnight Suns* clearly doesn't take place in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It's based on favourite moments from those classic

comics. Firaxis' "fussier" version of Doctor Strange is particularly distinct from his Benedict Cumberbatch film incarnation.

"In the

Midnight Sons run of comics that this game is inspired by, Doctor Strange would always show up and have this amazing cape," says Solomon, "and he'd be like, 'I could stop her, but if I did, the force of my energies would rip the universe apart. Good luck!' And then he'd fly off, and you're like, 'OK, Doctor Strange.'"

Strange delivers a version of that line early in *Midnight Suns* when Tony Stark asks him to tell the demon which heats their forge (I know as much as you) to increase the temperature a few hundred Kelvin. "I could," says Doctor Strange.

**MIDNIGHT SUNS
CLEARLY DOESN'T TAKE
PLACE IN THE MARVEL
CINEMATIC UNIVERSE**

OBJECTIVES

DEFEAT ENEMIES

Defeat All Enemies



ABOVE: The cards won't require much explaining to *Hearthstone* and *Slay the Spire* players.

"However, it might shatter the containment spell preventing him from incinerating this facility."

GOOD COMPANY

Midnight Suns can't quite escape comparisons to the movies, though. At times, its banter does come off like a lesser version of all that crisply-edited movie dialogue. But the films always feel a little too self-satisfied to me, whereas *Midnight Suns* really works for its sense of off-the-cuff playfulness. It's full of mid-combat quips and incidental dialogue, some of which I wound up skipping in order to initiate a conversation with the very same character who was speaking, and the *Mass Effect*-style branching conversations mean that Nico Minoru needs not just one droll line about how her mum tried to kill her, but several. It feels effortful instead of effortless – so, it's not very off the cuff – but I ended up appreciating how hard it was working to make me smile. The simplest, least-clever gags work the best, like Tony Stark





repeatedly referring to Doctor Strange as “Doctor Spooky”.

You can tell Firaxis is trying something new here – there’s a lot of exposition and eyebrow-led acting in the interactive dialogue scenes – but even beloved RPG developers BioWare, CD Projekt, and Bethesda get roasted for awkward dialogue and janky animation now and then

(or a lot), so the studio is in good company from a certain perspective.

If it’s got heart, I’m sure we’ll forgive some *Sims*-like body language for the opportunity to make friends with the likes of Spider-Man, Magik, Ghost Rider, Doctor Strange, and Blade, or at least to watch them bicker amongst themselves.



READ THE CARDS

What a Midnight Suns attack looks like

1 Playing regular attacks fills your Heroism pool, which can be used to play Heroic cards.

2 The amount of Heroism required to play this card. Heroism can also be spent on environmental actions, like kicking a concrete block at someone.

3 The amount of damage the attack will do. Basic enemies always die in one hit.

4 Chain attacks can target multiple enemies, or pummel one enemy multiple times.

5 This is Blade, the hero making the attack.



» HEROES AND ANTI-HEROES

Firaxis is doing a lot here: there's a friendship system, and optional 'mystery system' involving a ghost, a hellhound to pet, challenge missions to master, upgrades to research, velvet curtains to buy for your bedroom, and a whole 'light' and 'dark' character development system.

You play as The Hunter, a new, customisable Marvel hero created

specifically to star in *Midnight Suns*. At character creation, I selected an enormous '80s mane of hair, which admittedly made it hard to take anything The Hunter said very seriously, but I like that they aren't a total player stand-in. Their aunt once trained them as a weapon against their own mother, Lilith, Mother of Demons, who they defeated before taking a 300-year-long recovery nap.





TOP: The Mirror Table is a place for meetings and mission selection.

LEFT: After playing three cards, Captain Marvel can transform into her Binary form.

HOME AND AWAY

What superheroes are like at home and in the field

AT HOME

TONY STARK

Has a moustache. Forges new cards. Kind of an ass.



IN THE FIELD

IRON MAN

Looks like a 1989 Ferrari F40. Still kind of an ass.

CAROL DANVERS

Sends heroes on side missions.



CAPTAIN MARVEL

Genuinely pretty frightening.

STEPHEN STRANGE

Crafts mystical objects.



DOCTOR STRANGE

Casts the Winds of Watoomb.

NICO MINORU

Keeps everyone together. Likes movies.



NICO WITH A COOL STAFF

Can cast any spell one time.

ERIC BROOKS

Upgrades cards, doesn't go by Eric.



BLADE

Earns his name, kills vampires and everything else.



Now Lilith has been resurrected by the evil-doers at Hydra, and so Doctor Strange has awoken The Hunter to commit matricide once again. (I'm not sure if that's a light or dark thing to do?)

Conversing mostly takes place at The Abbey, a "haunted Transian castle" that's explored in third-person. Your allies are scattered around like crew members at their stations, waiting to chat, upgrade stuff and digest the resources you've collected on missions. Doctor Strange and Tony Stark, for instance, use the demon forge to combine high-tech materials and the mystic arts (which manifests as gold filigree) into custom armour, as well as to conjure up new cards to slot into your heroes' decks.

The light and dark system isn't just about dialogue: There are light and dark cards, too, like the Dark Heal skill I acquired, which leeches The

Hunter's HP to fully restore an ally's HP and cure status effects. The Hunter isn't in danger of joining Lilith on the dark side, though. There's no branching story here, and despite the name, the light and dark system is less 'Jedi vs Sith' and more 'hero vs anti-hero.' Are you the Captain America type, or the Wolverine type?

PREACH TO THE SPIRE

Or, maybe you're the 'I hate card games' type? "Cards have baggage," says Solomon. "You either picture your grandma playing pinochle, or you picture microtransactions." Neither pinochle nor premium card

packs feature in *Midnight Suns*. For Solomon, cards are just an "ability delivery system" that's useful for designing tactical puzzles. He didn't have to convince me that card games are cool, but I did struggle to adapt. *Midnight Suns* looks like *XCOM*, so I kept expecting it to play like *XCOM* – I'd forgotten that it's *Opposite Day*.

In *XCOM*, you always know what each soldier can do on a turn (shoot at aliens, mostly), but there's a chance they'll miss. In *Midnight Suns*, your three heroes never miss, but what they can do is always changing, because their abilities are dealt as cards from a shuffled deck.

Objectives such as rescuing civilians also manifest as cards, so one of a turn's three card plays has to be

burned to accomplish them, but it isn't super important which hero actually lifts the concrete slab off the bystander. In *XCOM*, on the other hand, deciding who to

send charging toward death to accomplish an objective is the essential experience.

XCOM worries like cover and sightlines mostly don't factor in *Midnight Suns*, either. If I play one of Blade's sword attacks, for example, I can pick any target on the field and he'll automatically dash up to them before striking, regardless of how far away he started. It's tough to get your head around at first.

To digress for a moment, the animations here almost feel over-produced compared to the dialogue scenes: Captain Marvel pauses to flex at the camera after each punch, Spidey launches into each attack by



Marvel's *Midnight Suns*

first posing in one of his signature airborne contortions. Art director Dennis Moellers says the animation team looked at hundreds of poses from each character's comic archives, and also studied anime such as *Attack on Titan*, *Demon Slayer*, and *Fullmetal Alchemist*. The result is that even a basic punch looks like it pureed three organs. It's fantastic.

Although range rarely mattered, directionality did. Knockback abilities don't do damage unless you knock the enemy backwards into something, for instance, so a bit of manoeuvring can be needed to make use of them. You can only command one hero per turn to move to an arbitrary spot on the map, while the others have to be moved as a consequence of an action they take, such as an attack. My decisions therefore started to resemble those made by pro billiards players, who are not only trying to sink a ball with each shot, but also leave the cue ball in an advantageous position. To effectively use Captain Marvel's Photon Beam, which skewers multiple enemies in a line, I might have had to first have her punch a goon on the other side of the map to put her at the end of a row.

It's an unusual system that could lead to some fun trick shots – you can even knock Hydra goons into pits – but these spatial complications don't feel essential to *Midnight Suns*.

Where the *XCOM* games are combat simulations that are inextricable from game boards, you could make a version of *Midnight Suns* that's purely a card game.

BREAKING THE GAME

Solomon says he's "always wanted" to create card-based tactics puzzles, and the device happened to be thematically appropriate for a superhero game.

"The point of almost every card game is to almost break the game," says Solomon. "You have these moments that are higher than almost any high when it comes to tactics, where you just get this amazing set of

cards or circumstances that work together. And then you basically break the game and you're like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm off the deep end here.'

That's the really fun part of having card mechanics, and it fits really well with the idea of superheroes, because you can't have a level one Iron Man. What does that mean? Like, Iron Man's Iron Man, right?"

Slay the Spire players will know that 'breaking the game' feeling. The roguelike deckbuilder has inspired a few card games over the past few years, including this one, and is all about playing card effects off each other to produce decks that are so godlike they feel like software bugs.

Midnight Suns didn't present me with opportunities to twirl Doctor

"THE POINT OF ALMOST EVERY CARD GAME IS TO ALMOST BREAK THE GAME"



ABOVE: The Hunter goes on each mission with two other heroes.

Strange in an infinite damage loop. In the early going, the synergies between my cards and heroes were basic. For instance, some heroes generate lots of Heroism, a resource used to play powerful cards, while others use up a lot of Heroism. Eventually, though, Solomon wants his hand as the designer to disappear.

THE ANTI-XCOM

One way that'll happen is with randomised card mods, which come into play at some point after my demo ended. Solomon says there are systems to ensure that legendary card mods, such as one that eliminates the Heroism cost of a Heroic card, aren't handed out over and over. Otherwise, though, Solomon doesn't plan to step in and "fix" mods when they create overpowered decks.

"If you have this insane card, and you get it at the right time, and you can support it with other heroes or other abilities, then man, go crazy," he says. "That's what this whole game is about. Like, destroy that enemy that should take four turns.





Wipe him out in one. Who cares? That's what the game is about."

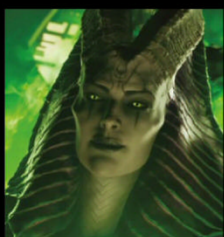
At its heart, *Midnight Suns* is "the complete opposite" of *XCOM* because you're not commanding frightened recruits named after your friends and family, a few of whom will almost certainly be murdered by aliens. You're commanding Carol Danvers, who's part alien herself, flies at mach six and, like certain bacteria, can survive in the empty vacuum of

space. In that scenario, the question isn't 'can I get everyone out alive?' but 'what's the most efficient way to beat the crap out of Venom?' It's something I haven't played before, and that's exciting.

Of course, with Solomon's luck, a rival strategy game designer might coincidentally release the same kind of game just before *Midnight Suns* makes it out the door in October. I'll cross my fingers for him. ■

VILLAIN TIME

The forces of evil standing in your way



LILITH
Trying to resurrect Chthon. Also, she's your mother.



FALLEN VENOM
An alien symbiote who fell in with the wrong crowd.



HYDRA
Resurrected Lilith. Keeps doing stuff like that for some reason.



SCARLET WITCH
Might be good. Might be bad. That's Wanda Maximoff!



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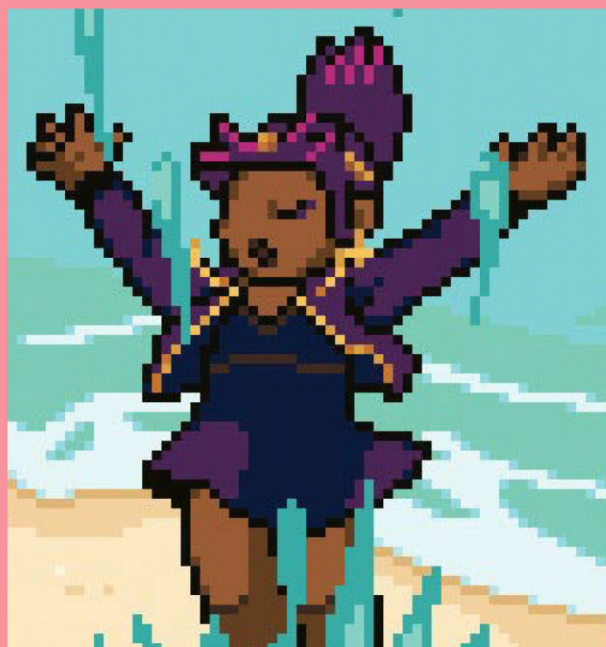
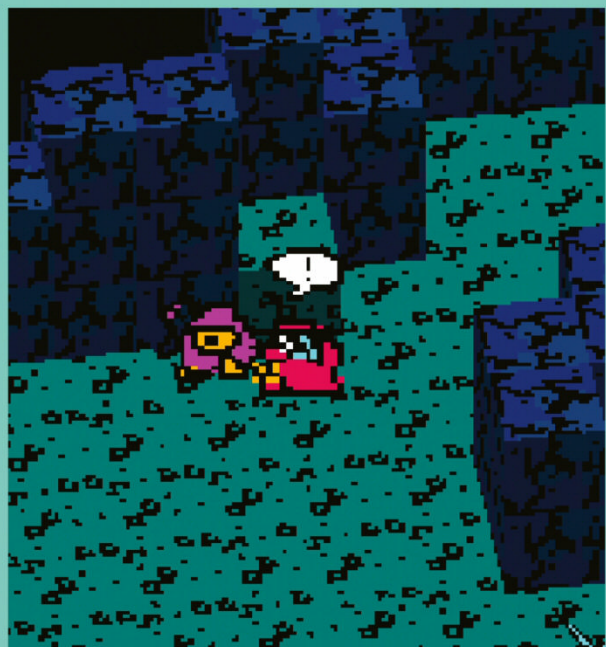
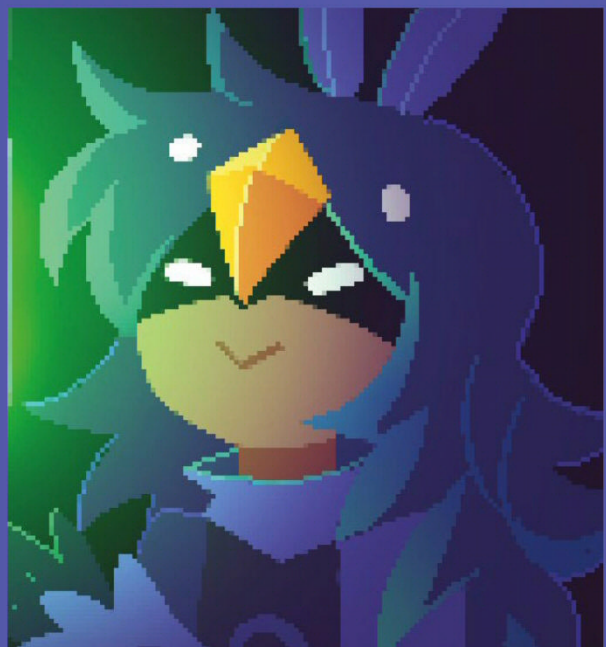
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Short stories

How indie **'MICRO-RPGs'** offer
fascinating perspectives on the
genre's overstuffed epics.

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell



In what crumbling, dragon-leather tome was it written that role-playing games have to be so incredibly long? It's certainly not a convention that rings true for Sraëka Lillian, whose RPG Maker-based 'OI' games clock in at a few hours apiece. Each is a focused exploration of one of "a thousand little questions" an RPG developer must answer – *Atom OI*, for example, is an interrogation of the nuances of status effects. "My points of obsession are these fundamentals of RPG design, right?" Sraëka explains. "And I don't need to make a big game to explore those."

Once you're done with the OI games you could move onto jetstorm4's *Fallen Star*, or John Thyer's *Facets* – two wordier yet equally brisk productions that are pitched as the climax of longer, untold fantasy stories. "Like, you get that there's a 20 hour version of this," says Thyer, "but we're cutting straight to the part you care the most about." Or if you want something a touch more esoteric – *Hylics*, Mason Lindroth's visually overpowering but concise claymation escapade. Or for a splash of romance, *Get In The Car, Loser*, the hectic lesbian roadtrip RPG from *Ladykiller In A Bind* developer Christine Love, which tells much of its story in the backseat of a speeding pink convertible. Or for something at once comedic and darker, *Slimes* from scitydreamer, in which you play an asshole adventurer eradicating a single dungeon's worth of *Dragon Quest*'s least-threatening critters.

That's just a small sample of the genre – 'micro' or 'capsule' RPGs, ranging from surgical poetic experiments crafted with free tools such as RPG Maker or Game Maker, to slightly bulkier commercial indies that sometimes play like ruthlessly efficient fan edits of blockbuster RPGs. Micro-RPGs are music to the ears of genre fans who no longer have time for the kinds of games they binge-played as kids, but even if you're a diehard *Dragon Age* player with weeks to spare, these games are worthwhile for how they concentrate and reveal things about the behemoths they riff on.

It's hard to say when RPGs became associated with gruelling length, partly because 'RPG' has become an enormously elastic term, stretching to everything from *Elden Ring* through *Borderlands* to *Persona 4* and *Skyrim*. The primary checks on playlength are practical factors: the size of your team and budget, production timeframes, and having access to the right tools. But Bill Steirnborg – one half of *Cosmic Star Heroine* developer Zeboyd Games – also dates the expectation of a mammoth hour count to the original PlayStation era and the rise of FMV-led RPGs like *Final Fantasy VII*. "It's funny how the context changes. So like, *Chrono Trigger* is a classic, everyone loves it, and it's something like 20 hours long, even if you don't know exactly what you're doing. But somewhere in the late 16-bit, 32-bit era, there came this notion that 40 hours was the expectation. And then as the PS2, PS3 rolled on, that became 60 hours. And now 90 hours long is normal."

This is especially the case, of course, with premium-priced blockbuster RPGs. "You can tell a great story in two or three or four or five or six hours, and I wish there was more of that," Steirnborg goes on. "But understandably, a big studio is not going to take that risk – they're not going to pour a large or even a medium budget into an RPG that's four hours long. And that's kind of where small studios like ours come in."

TOO BIG TO FAIL

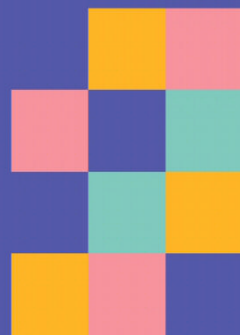
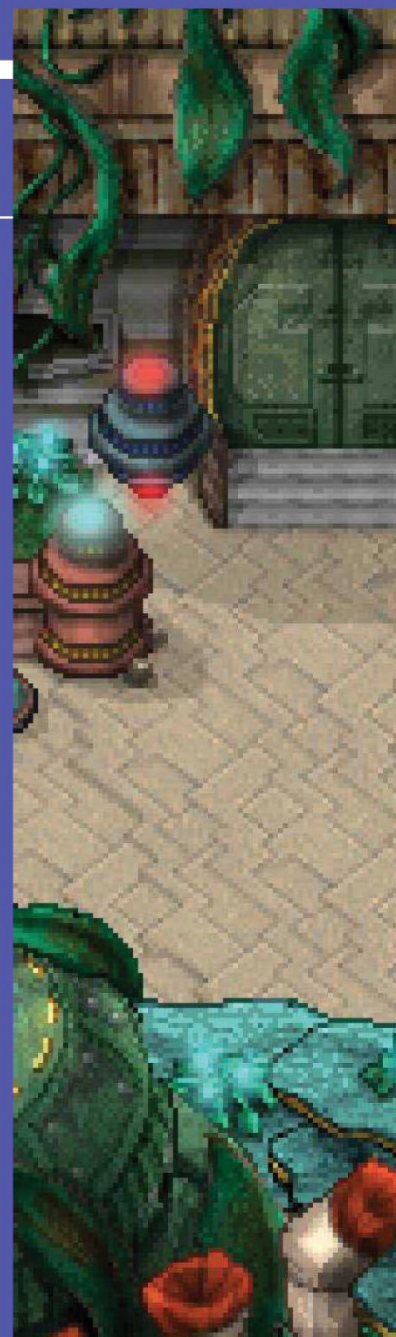
John Thyer suggests that players in North America and Europe have fallen out of love with shortform art in general, linking the bloating of RPG playtimes to the rise of 'extended' narrative universes across games, film, and TV. "I think that it's hard sometimes to just sit down with a smaller work – I feel like that translates to how the Marvel Cinematic Universe is really popular right

now. People like following one big epic story over a long period of time. And I think that it can be hard for people to accept a smaller thing, a one-and-done thing that tells a complete, satisfying story, because it doesn't feed that nerd brain quite in the same way." Thyer also points to the broader 'fetishisation' of complexity in art as a potential catalyst for exhausting playlengths. There are obvious connections with service-based monetisation, with publishers like Square Enix transforming their already-gargantuan fairytale settings into persistent revenue platforms that are designed to

hold your attention indefinitely.

Some shortform RPGs play like refreshing, puzzler-style deconstructions of systems from those exhaustive big studio projects. Sraëka's wonderful *Cataphract OI*, for instance, is a meditation on time inside and outside combat. Four adventurers invade a fortress to break a time loop – a premise that feeds into battles whose participants are effectively suspended outside time and so invulnerable unless forced into 'the fray'. The project began life as Sraëka tinkering aimlessly with a novel

It's hard to say
when RPGs
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LITTLEBIGPLANESCAPES

Some slightly bulkier smaller RPG productions



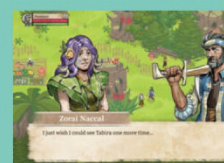
HERO MUST DIE. AGAIN

You've saved the world, dying in the process, but the gods have granted you five days (around four hours per run) to put your affairs in order while your power dwindles.



FEATHERFALL

A *Souls*-like from indefatigable miniature-maker Sokpop Collective that should last you five hours tops. Fight seven bosses across four areas as a sword-wielding fledgling.



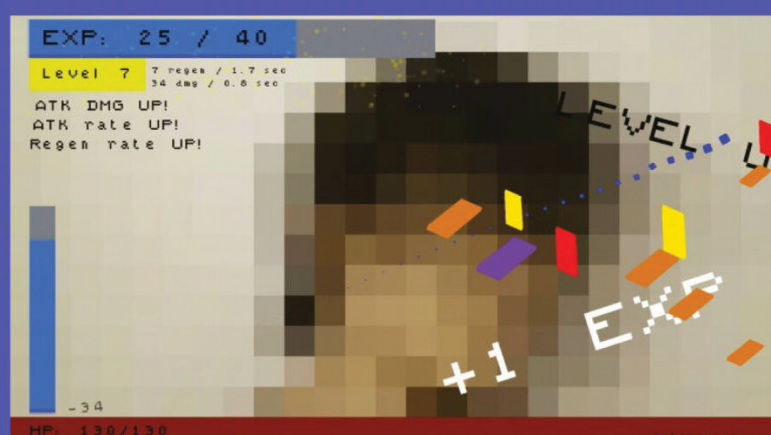
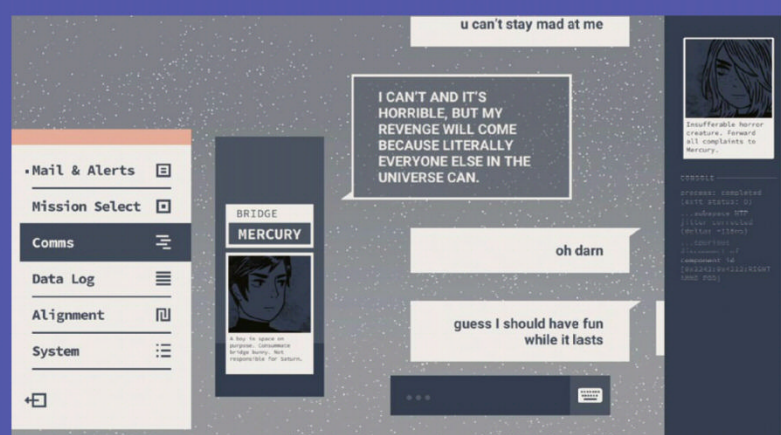
MOON HUNTERS

A one to four player action-RPG from the *Boyfriend Dungeon* devs – and a quickfire *Fable*-style personality test. Each choice you make adds to a legend depicted as a constellation.



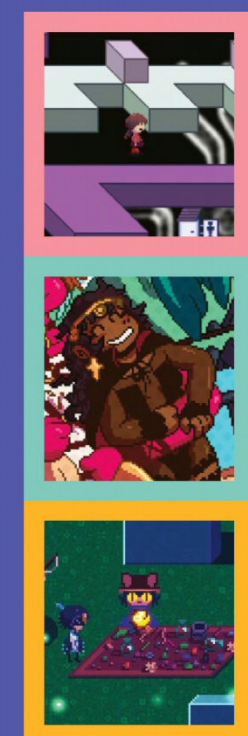
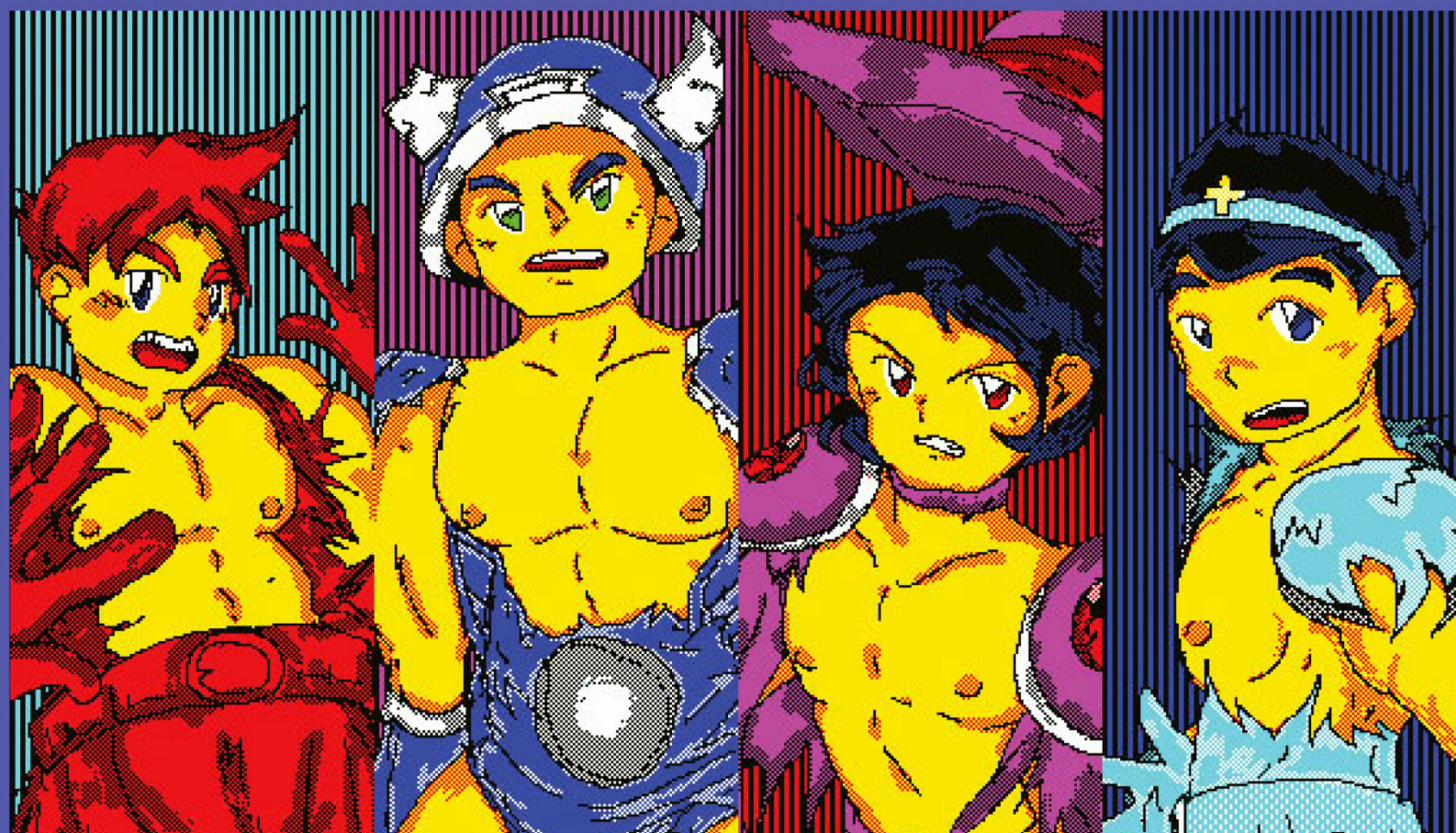
SKYBORN

Old school '90s 2D RPG with a steampunk setting, airships, *Dragon Quest*-style POV battle screens, and a plot theme of machinery versus magic. Can be finished in ten hours.



LEFT: The amusing but troubling *FACE/PALM* invites you to slap its creator about in order to level him up, while reducing his health – you only get to play once.

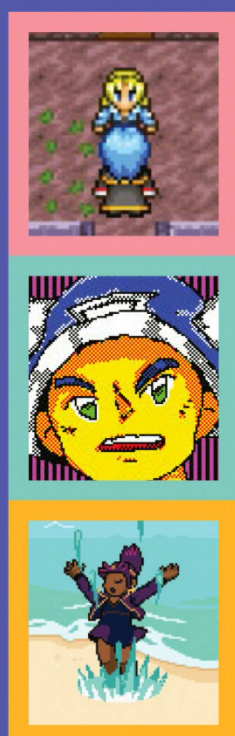
LOWER LEFT: *Geasaga* from KA-INWORKS channels the era of Japanese home computer such as the PC-88, with a radioactive palette (and bulging pecs).





ABOVE: *Hyllys 2* is longer than the first, but still a sleek contender at around 15 hours in length – the art direction belies the cleanly-built RPG beneath.

RIGHT: Inasmuch as the RPG maker scene has a patron saint, it's the harrowing yet very playful *Yume Nikki*, released in 2004.





» movement system – enter a room, and your party wanders through and fans out in a crisp kind of characterisation. “I wound up dropping off for a year coming back and saying, OK, I have some pieces here, I want to make something out of them. And so it was really what can I do with the pieces I’ve already haphazardly slapped down on the board, rather than a thoroughly, intentionally probing experiment.”

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Get In The Car, Loser, meanwhile, condenses its playtime by focusing on cast interactions. Inspired by *Valkyrie Profile* and *Final Fantasy XIII* – a game whose opening half is one drawn-out getaway sequence – it leans into the fact that party-member sidestories are often more involving than the overarching plot. “It’s got four characters, four bosses, four areas, and each chapter revolves around a single character’s concerns,” Love says, adding that she hopes “the main reason to keep playing is to hang out with them more”. The character focus “meant we could de-emphasise certain things, like complicated plot twists or map exploration, in favour of the feeling of ‘you learn a lot about people when you’re on an adventure in a crowded car with them’”. Having the whole yarn play out on the road also gave Love’s team tighter control over the alternation between dialogue and battling.

GITCL often relies on comedy to stop things dragging, “If there was ever a moment that felt a little too boring to me, I could just punch it up with jokes,” Love says. Many micro-RPGs are comedies or parodies – two formative examples are *Magic Wand* from thecatamites and Toby Fox’s *Undertale*. Zeboyd, especially, has profited from developing RPGs with tongue in cheek. “[When] we made *Cthulhu Saves The World*, game comedy was pretty uncommon,” Stiernberg says. “There was this gap in the market. So we wanted to appeal and just be entertaining with the story that way, since we knew we

weren’t making some huge 40-hour epic.” *Cosmic Star Heroine*, meanwhile, is a more earnest spoof of spy cinema – another flavour of story that puts an emphasis on snappiness. “Instead of going with a *Mass Effect*-esque space drama, we wanted to do a more James Bond story where it’s fast-paced, you’re undercover half the time – there’s a whole scenario where you go to a dinner party in disguise.”

Which is not to say that shortform RPGs can’t explore more sombre themes. Thyer’s *Facets*, for instance, began life as a homage to boss dungeons in early *Final Fantasy*, but evolved into a difficult and very personal narrative about a group of dream-diving inquisitor-type figures rewriting somebody’s personality. *FF* aside, Thyer took inspiration from RPG Maker projects *OFF*, *Space Funeral*, and in particular the legendary *Yume Nikki* – a shifting strata of dreamworlds with no combat or levelling. “It

represents these really raw, ugly feelings almost purely through RPG map design, and that’s fascinating to me. So I was like, what if you’re exploring a brain that’s explicitly a psychological space, what if these bosses are pieces of that personality... I was in kind of a dark space, making the game – it was the end of my marriage, I was getting divorced. And my brain went to conversion therapy and telling this really tragic, ugly, sad story.”

While clearly set in a larger narrative universe, *Facets* avoids undue exposition about, say, the means of invading minds. “I think having thought that stuff through

helped the endgame land better because there was a logic, and if there’s a logic to the creator, that usually comes across to the player,” Thyer says. “I just don’t waste their time actually explaining it, because I don’t think it matters to the feelings I want to get across.”

TOLKIEN POINTS

Many bigger RPGs embrace exposition because they are steeped in the legacy of certain ponderous fantasy or science-fiction books, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, but as Zeboyd’s other half Robert Boyd points out, fantasy and sci-fi needn’t be colossal exercises in world-building or stretching a plot across continents and generations. “If you look at the horror genre, *Resident Evil 4* is a good 20-25 hours long. But you can also have a very succinct 90-minute horror experience that tells a good story. You can have a *Twilight Zone* episode, that’s a half an hour that tells a complete story, or a Junji Ito comic strip that you could get through in ten minutes. It leaves an impact if it’s done well. So I think the idea that fantasy or sci-fi RPGs have to be really long is flawed. I think there’s room for the equivalent of a short story.”

Grandiose narratives in RPGs are also justified with reference to levelling systems – the idea is that you’ll have more of an emotional connection with characters after spending dozens of hours tuning their stats. But do progression systems really need a 20+ hour runtime to have such an impact? “I feel like you can have progression levelling systems even in a short game,” observes Boyd. “Maybe you want to simplify them so much that you’re

Do progression systems really need a 20+ hour runtime to have such an impact?

LONGREADS

Four big RPGs that carry their own weight...



TRAILS IN THE SKY TRILOGY

“I think they dedicate that time to creating a lived-in world and it’s not just world-building for the sake of it – they build in these deeply human stories”
– John Thyer



PERSONA 4: GOLDEN

“It plays really well in episodes of 30 minutes or an hour [because] it’s more segmented between town exploration and character interaction and dungeons.”
– Bill Stiernberg



PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

“It’s a big 30 hour epic, but it’s not a save the world quest. It’s this one dude, figuring out his baggage. And I really liked the scope there.”
– John Thyer



FINAL FANTASY XII

“It has a particularly high proportion of optional stuff you’re dealing with all the time – monster hunts and side quests and secret things to explore.”
– Sraëka Lillian

Micro-RPGs

not poring over *Path of Exile*-style massive matrices, trying to min-max everything, but there's no reason why you can't have a five-hour game that has a strong progression system. We see that with games like *Super Metroid* – you can beat the whole thing in four or five hours, but you're constantly gaining new abilities and more power as you progress."

Stiernberg notes that how many different abilities, spells, perks and so on you pack into a progression system is less important than how you pace them. He stresses the importance of "a reasonable learning curve that doesn't just throw you in the deep end – although that there's some merit to that, being thrown into the deep end can be really interesting – but just being able to learn and apply it and towards the end, being able to really dig into the strategies".

Well-wrought shorter RPGs such as Zeboyd's own *Cosmic Star Heroine* demonstrate that quick progression arcs can be satisfying, but as Love cautions, they also show that RPGs do generally need more time to teach their intricacies than other genres.

"Especially if you're introducing unfamiliar mechanics to people who are otherwise very familiar with genre conventions, it's really important to not rush through things, or the player will just say, 'Oh, yeah, I've played RPGs before, I know this!' and then get frustrated when it causes them trouble later in the game, so the desire to not bore the player with dragging out introductions, and the desire to just 'get to the good part' can be at odds."

EXPERIENCE NOT REQUIRED

A conspicuous reliance on grinding aside, Sraëka argues that sluggish endgames are the most obvious symptom of RPG bloat. "Part of what keeps the friction of fighting battles down early on is novelty. And it's common to not introduce a whole lot in the back half, though there are RPGs that do mix things up that I think are really interesting. *The 7th Saga* [for SNES] gives you these items you can use over and over that can restore your HP in battle or give you powerful buffs that are almost necessary for survival. You accumulate these through the middle three fifths of the game, become very dependent on them, and then it takes them all away for the last act. You have to learn how to fight all over again."

Sraëka feels that RPGs should "push back" on players more towards the finish, though they acknowledge that balancing a character's capabilities at every point in an RPG is a huge labour. The OI games don't feature XP or levelling: it's more like meeting with the party at a critical point in their adventures. "It is a lot simpler to balance these things as a single person if you don't have to worry about all these variables changing. It's a wonder to me that anyone – especially solo developers – has ever completed a long RPG where the numbers are going up the whole time, and you have to account for them at each stage."

While they hold out hope of working on a larger RPG project some day, Sraëka has plenty of "unfinished business" with RPG Maker and doesn't regard the OI

games as "stepping stones" to a grander opportunity. "A lot of my work comes from the feeling of, 'I'm really restless right now, I want to make something and I don't want to spend forever on it.'"

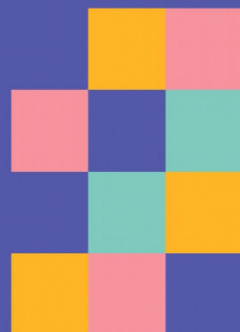
Thyer, similarly, doesn't see *Facets* as the prelude to a larger, more commercial project, not least because he values peace of mind over professional prestige. "I'm not trying to iterate on one thing and get really good at making RPGs and then spend five years making a 20-hour long RPG for Steam. I've just seen a ton of people get burned out taking that approach. I am more interested in doing literally whatever seems fun for me in the moment."

Thyer also points out that the value of shortform games at large is the community they create, where people release quickfire experiments in response to each other's work. "I want to cultivate spaces where my friends can feel comfortable and encouraged to be just recklessly creative."

You could argue that RPGs tend to be gargantuan not because their creators associate time investment with enjoyment, but because they make a point of housing many different experiences, from wonky minigames through scenarios such as puzzle-dungeons to the systems that make up battle.

Rather than 'epics', it's perhaps healthier to frame them as something akin to Thyer's hopes for the shortform gaming scene – a bustling collection of experiments, thrown together in the course of exploring a world. Micro-RPGs might take issue with the legwork involved, but they're not at odds with this ethos. They just give some of those flourishes a little more room to shine. ■

Sluggish
endgames are
the most
obvious
symptom of
RPG bloat



MASTERCLASS

Dos and don'ts for aspiring RPG devs, from our interviewees



DO ...

...take inspiration from 'non-story' genres. John Thyer notes that fighting game backgrounds especially "paint a picture of this whole massive ecosystem".

DON'T...

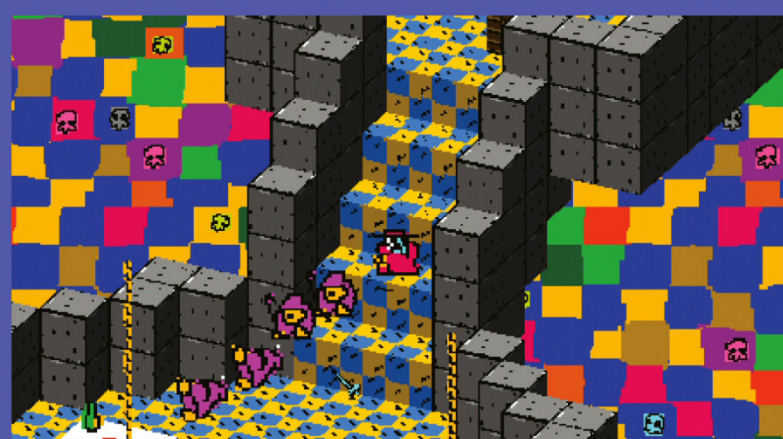
...feel obliged to include a 'proper' story. As Robert Boyd points out, the original *Etrian Odyssey* on DS got by without one for all of 40 hours.

DO ...

...try to finish something. As Thyer adds, making your first game a blow-by-blow homage to *Dragon Age* is a recipe for burnout.

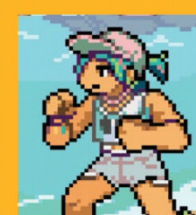
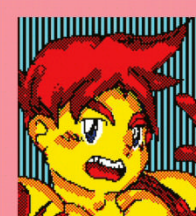
DON'T...

...get too comfortable with the town/dungeon loop. "Try to fit in special scenarios with a twist," says Robert Boyd. "*Final Fantasy VI* was great at that."



BELOW LEFT: A good foil for *Undertale*, *OneShot* casts you as a lost child trying to restore the sun, and is a regular tear-jerker.

LEFT: *Golden Rays of Sunshine* is a sorrowful GameBoy-style RPG with no combat, which evokes a war-torn world in a few sentences.



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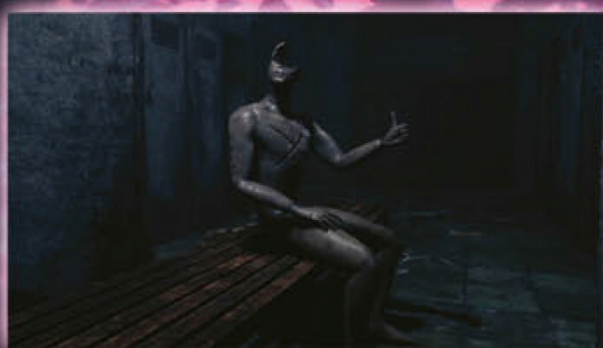
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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Small change

Once upon a time, this magazine would've reviewed literally every PC game that came out each month. These days, that's impossible – even in the driest months, you can expect hundreds of games to launch across the various digital storefronts. So we have to make choices: how many do we cover, which ones and how much space do we give to each? We don't want to miss anything cool, but equally we don't want to waste your time and ours on games that you're not interested in.

With all that in mind, we're trying a bit of a different approach going forward – fewer reviews, focusing in on what we think are the stand-out games of the month (for better or worse), but with on average more pages on each, so we can be more in-depth with our analysis. See what you think – we reckon it's a good shake-up.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer





Contents

- 62 Hardspace: Shipbreaker
- 66 **Eternal Threads**
- 68 Sniper Elite 5
- 72 **Vampire: The Masquerade – Swansong**
- 76 Citizen Sleeper
- 78 **Unexplored 2**
- 82 Trek to Yomi
- 84 **Salt and Sacrifice**

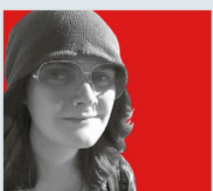
FREE GAMES

- 88 Our Lady of Sorrow
- 89 **Looper**
- 89 Out of the Blue

THEY'RE BACK

- 90 Far Cry
- 91 **Grow Home**
- 91 Firewatch
- 91 **Eastshade**
- 91 Proteus

This month's blue collar reviewers...



NAT CLAYTON
Specialist in
Breaking news
Currently playing
Hardspace: Shipbreaker
This month
Deconstructed spaceships and capitalism.



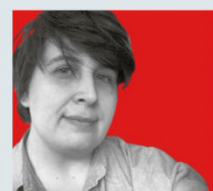
SAMANTHA GREER
Specialist in
Staying on target
Currently playing
Sniper Elite 5
This month
Fired her review at us from 115 miles away (via email).



RICK LANE
Specialist in
Undead politics
Currently playing
Vampire: The Masquerade
This month
Played this year's 253rd World of Darkness game.



JODY MCGREGOR
Specialist in
Sleeping on the job
Currently playing
Citizen Sleeper
This month
Learned why an android's favourite food is home-grown mushrooms.



KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in
Fortune telling
Currently playing
Unexplored 2
This month
Developed a new phobia of being killed by falling rocks.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Evading unmoving statues
Currently playing
Our Lady of Sorrow
This month
Proved he has no fear. He's not even scared of the Virgin Mary!



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Jungle stealth
Currently playing
Far Cry
This month
Got to that one bit that of *Far Cry* that not even Ubisoft remembers.

SHIP SHAPE

Work off your debt one salvage job at a time in **HARDSPACE: SHIPBREAKER**

By Nat Clayton

My first workplace accident was a doozy. I'd cut my teeth on enough Mackerel-class ships to know 'em like the back of my hand. But confidence breeds overconfidence, and in forgetting to decompress the engine room before removing the thruster, I took a thruster cap to the forehead at 50mph. Shipbreaking's good, honest work – but remember that in space, nobody can hear workplace safety violations.

Two years ago, Blackbird Interactive (developer of *Homeworld Remastered Collection* and *Deserts of Kharak*) took a step away from warring empires and operatic battles to focus on a more mundane look at the distant future – a world where those vibrant, Chris Foss-inspired spaceships are just piles of scrap ready to be turned into paycheques.

CUTTING EDGE

Hardspace: Shipbreaker has come a long way since entering Early Access, but the core shipbreaking has been consistently satisfying since day one. Here's the deal: every morning you begin a shift, picking a new ship to crack or continuing one from the day prior. Each ship is built like, well, a ship – airlocks, engines, reactors, and crew compartments layered inside a structural frame and

layers of hull panelling to protect them from the elements.

Your first ships are simple enough. Everything can be sorted into three piles – the processor for stuff your employer Lynx wants recycled (usually hull panels), a barge for stuff it wants reused (computers, engines, furniture), and a furnace for scraps it wants rid of. Each piece properly scrapped adds progress

It feels like work, sure, but in the most satisfying way possible

towards your work orders, with higher rewards the more efficiently you dispose of a ship. Destroying or misallocating too much salvage will incur penalties and negligence can even lock you out of the more lucrative rewards.

As you mop up these stripped-out shuttles, you'll earn commendations with the company, and with them access to bigger, more complex ships

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A blue-collar spaceship deconstruction sim

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Blackbird Interactive

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia RTX 2070, 16GB RAM, AMD Ryzen 5 3600

MULTIPLAYER
No – just online leaderboards

LINK
focus-entmt.com

to scrap. Very quickly you're forced to deal with pressurised compartments which will explosively, err, 'decompress' if not vented properly, fuel lines that will start fires if accidentally ruptured, and power boxes that, if mishandled, will set electricity coursing across the ship.

The biggest troublemakers are reactor cores, which require a deft hand and careful planning to remove and put into barge stasis, lest they go supernova and turn your salvage into worthless scrap – and your body into a costly insurance write-off.

Fortunately, earning promotions also gives you more tools to break ships with. Improved grapples and cutters, scanners to check the pressurisation levels before playing with lasers, remote detonators to sever an entire ship's cut-points at once, and tethers that let you pull at objects too heavy for your grapple.

SCRAPPER'S GOLD

Shipbreaking is a trade, and as you learn the intricacies of each ship class, you start to build little efficiencies and shortcuts. How to place your cutter just right to hit multiple cut points at once, how to use atmospheric decompression to your advantage, the best ways to drag those heavy Atlas engine plates into the processor, and the trick to cutting the floor out of a Mackerel and yanking the reactor straight into the barge. It feels like work, sure, but in the most satisfying way possible.

Shipbreaker's derelicts are simply a delight to break apart, and there's a real joy to peeling apart what looks at first glance to be a single, solid object until there's nothing left but dust and loose trash. Of course, these ships aren't torn apart factory-new; go rooting around and you'll find each one tells a different story.

Sometimes this is clear and explicit: audio logs rooted out of dishevelled crew compartments that can be decrypted back at home. These might shed light on working

STARSHIP ANATOMY 101

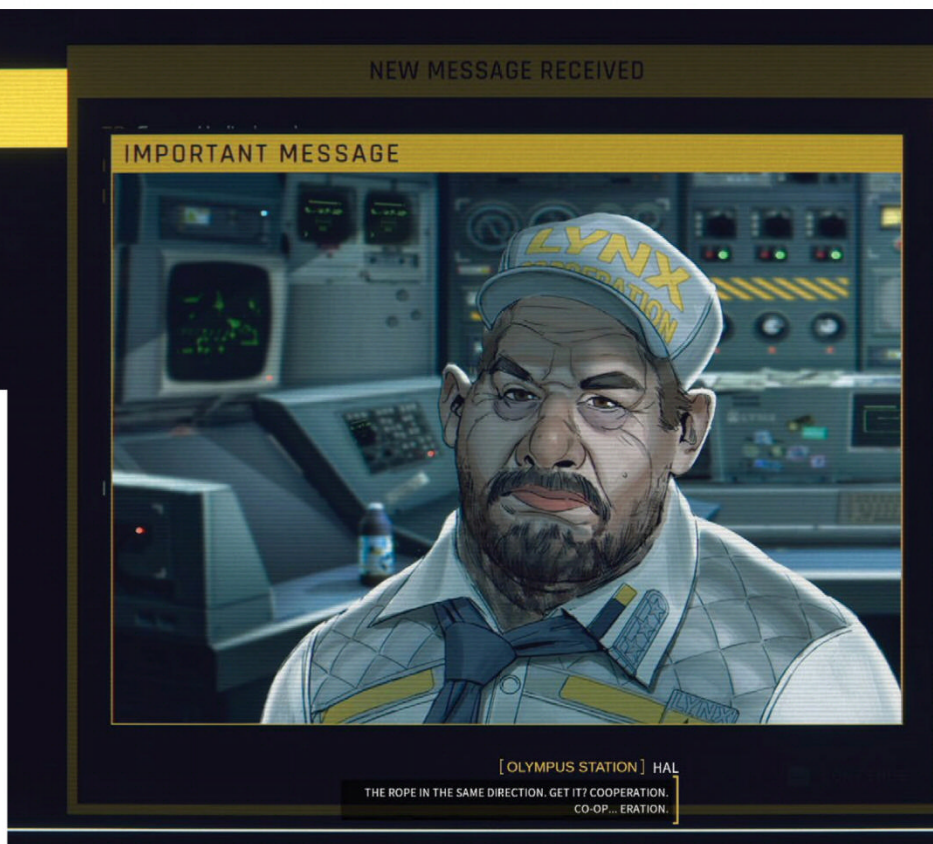
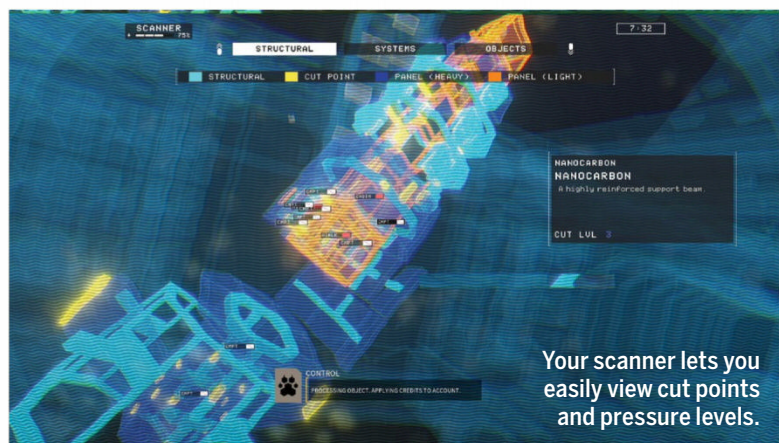
40% NANOCARBON
Lightweight, hardy, reprocessible.

35% ALUMINUM
The internal structure of a ship, and often the last thing disposed off.

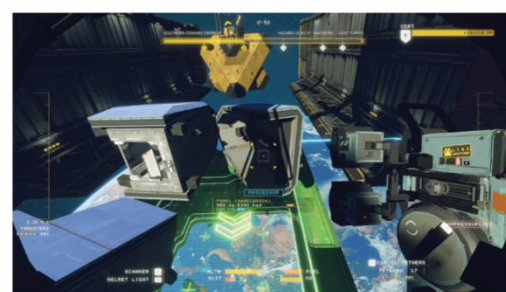
15% ELECTRONICS
Lightbulbs, terminals, hydroponics, and power supplies.

8% FURNITURE
Chairs, tables, and storage bins are all good to recycle.

2% CRISP PACKETS
I guess not even space travel's gonna stop folks from littering.

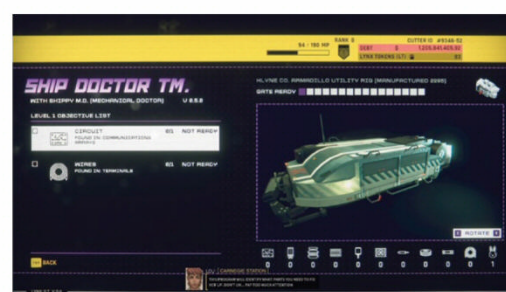


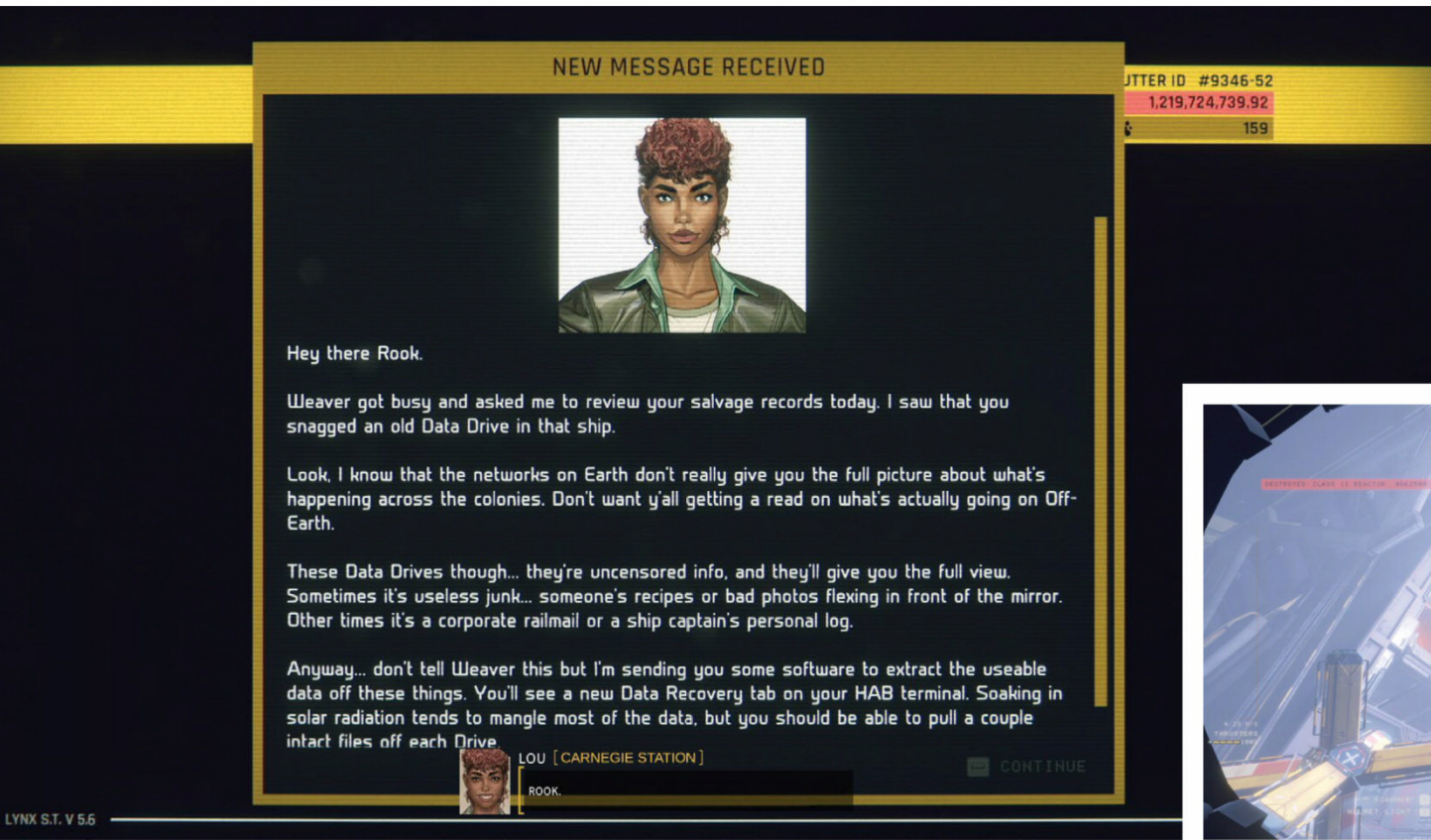
UTTER ID #9346-52
1,197,346,525.92
140



ABOVE: I'm sure this guy isn't an absolute slimeball, right?

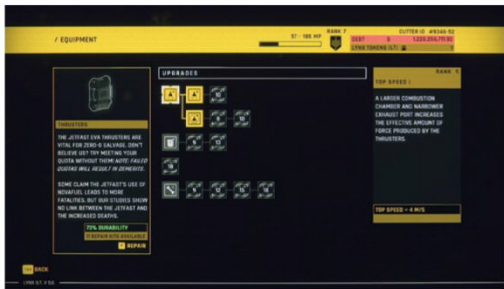
BELOW: Things get a little heated in the Atlas thrusters.





RIGHT: Would it kill you people to use bins?

BELOW: Honestly? I've seen London flats more cramped than this.



» conditions elsewhere in the solar system, or delve into the odd cult of the Machine God that's taken root in the stars. But more often than not it's just a voicemail left between families and co-workers.

Crewmates apologising for not taking their anger management classes seriously, a daughter forgiving their dad for not making it to their police academy

graduation. The solar system is weird and broken and massive, but *Shipbreaker* never lets you forget that it's full of human life.

Shipbreaking itself might seem glamorous, exploring old relics at the edge of space, but this is hard work with high risk and low pay. *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* is a game deeply concerned with what it means to do backbreaking work for a corporation that sees you as (quite literally) disposable labour.

COMPANY TIME

Cutters start work with two unpleasant benefits: a crippling pile of debt, and the reality that Lynx quite literally owns your body, signed over in your contract and regenerated instantly upon any workplace accident for a modest fee. Every piece of ship you scrap or salvage makes a tiny dent in that debt pile, but the company has a vested interest in keeping its workers indebted. All your tools are rentals, while vital supplies like oxygen, thruster fuel, tethers, and repair kits are purchased from the company store (or cheekily scrounged off ships, if you're lucky).

That framing was always there, but *Shipbreaker* now has a more explicit story that makes clear the developer's stance on worker exploitation. After a few shifts, you're brought into a group call with your fellow breakers – starting with your foreman, Weaver, a man who's here to teach you the ropes as well as act as the intermediary between the cutters and corporate. There's also Kai, the clumsy guy whose stuff is always breaking, while Deedee's the stubborn ol' mother who'll occasionally drunk-dial you after work. And then there's Lou, the dogged optimist who lets you in on plans to unionise Lynx's shipbreakers.

There's plenty of jovial workplace banter, but each and every one of you is struggling under the same

weight of debt, and it doesn't half feel like you're all basically imprisoned by this job.

Some of this chatter plays out during shifts, but much of it happens in your Hab – a 3D dorm where you can upgrade equipment, check your mail, and plan your next shift. It's a messy, utilitarian space, but one you can make a little cosier by snatching

posters and plushies from the ships you break. Weaver will even give you his old busted-up shuttle as a gift, and you can sneak in a few components during shifts to fix it up after work – a promise that you

might one day put the cutter's life behind you to see what else the solar system has to offer.

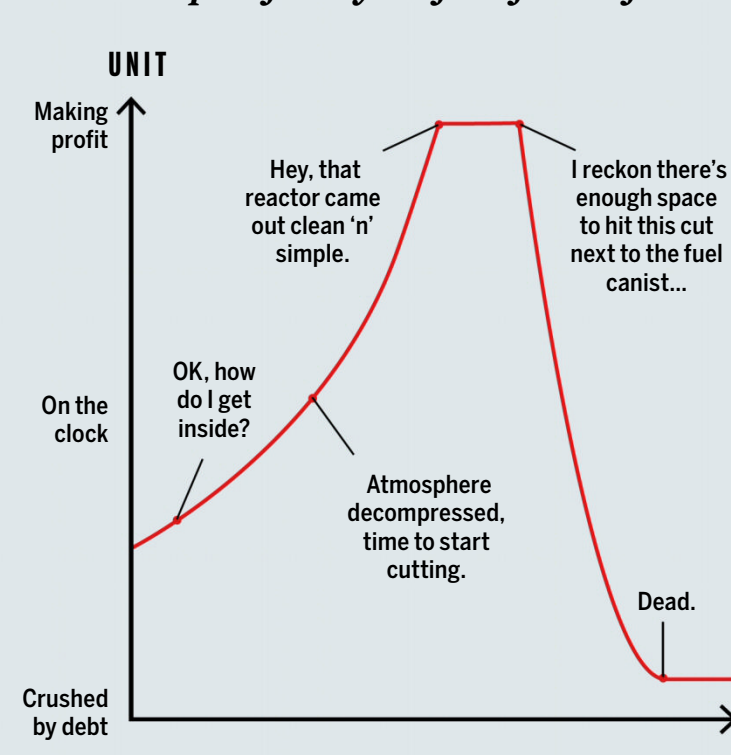
Emails will fill you in on game progress with the occasional side of corporate propaganda, but private newsgroups let you know how the union plans to deal with, say, an administrator coming down from corporate to crack down on activists. Lynx is just another Amazon or Tesla, and Blackbird is deft at writing the kind of slimy, family-friendly language these corporations use to dissuade unionisation efforts.

Your man from HQ isn't a suit, he's another worker just like you – touting the values of following proper procedure and the importance of

It's a game about being proud of a job well done

HAZARD PAY

What to expect from your first few shifts



'pulling the rope in the same direction'. The CEO sends uplifting videos about how the company is your family, even as you pay a premium for your own death.

MASTER UN-CRAFTER

Shipbreaking is good, honest work, and *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* doesn't think there's anything wrong with a bit of manual labour. It's a game that relishes in teaching you the joys of learning a trade, even if it's a ridiculously far-flung trade like cracking open starships. When I strip an Atlas to the bone in two straight shifts, I feel an immense amount of satisfaction in my ability.

Simultaneously, however, it makes it clear that multinational (multiplanetary) corporations and the pursuit of growth at all costs robs workers of their dignity and agency, turning jobs into effectively indentured servitude. It's a voice that elevates *Hardspace* into more than just a wonderfully tactile zero-g demolition sim.

It's a game about being proud of a job well done, and fighting to make your workplace one you can be proud of. It's a deliberately repetitive thing, which might be tedious if you can't find enjoyment out of methodically cutting apart ships across two, three, even four continuous shifts. Where small ships broke apart in minutes, pulling apart a Javelin or Gecko requires real commitment.

There are ways to mitigate the stress, of course. While the base game gives you 15 minute shifts, there's an Open Shift game mode that lets you spend as long as you like cracking open each work order. Free Play also lets you get used to every class of ship and every tool from the get-go. On the flipside, there are no-death and limited clone modes for expert cutters, and weekly challenges to prove yourself the most efficient shipbreaker in orbit.

It's certainly not a job for everyone, but it's one well-worth trying. And hey, if you manage to avoid accidentally shooting too many fuel tanks with your laser cutter, you might even manage to float away debt-free someday. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A satisfying disassembly sim wrapped in cutting workplace commentary, *Shipbreaker* is a gig worth taking up.

91

SECOND CHANCE

ETERNAL THREADS sends you back in time to fix some broken hearts

By Luke Winkie

Time travellers should be able to stop a house fire with ease. All you have to do is fix the faulty electrical wiring, or stamp out an errant cigarette butt, right? This is the premise you're presented with in *Eternal Threads*, but in this timeline, the blaze's casualties must be prevented with the power of kindness alone.

You are presented with a series of events that take place over the course of a week and imperceptibly add up to the tragic fire. Thankfully, you're gifted with technology that can slyly edit some of the decisions made between the house residents, ideally brewing up a butterfly effect that will get them out alive. *Eternal Threads* is a showcase of second chances, an invitation to reflect on the times in our lives when we didn't let cooler heads prevail.

There is a sci-fi veneer: you're cast as some sort of chrononaut in a dingy future, where time travel has littered the fourth dimension with all sorts of reality-eroding radiation. It's all left pretty vague, and *Eternal Threads* quickly escorts you to a house in England in the much more relatable year of 2015, where a landlord and a handful of troubled college kids spend the prime of their 20s. From there, *Eternal Threads*

Takes the form of a 3D stage play starring ghostly actors

takes the form of a 3D stage play starring ghostly actors. You queue up one of the scenes dotting the timeline and key into the nuances of this particular group dynamic. Occasionally, your temporal device

will chime in and ask if you want to swap in an alternative climax in the action. Maybe instead of texting his ex in a drunken stupor, Tom thinks better of it and heads to bed. Weave enough of these fragments together, in

the correct order, and eventually everyone survives the fire.

A game like *Eternal Threads* lives and dies by its characters and the core mystery of the drama, and while the residents of this house are not exactly Beckettian monoliths, I did root for them. Without spoiling anything, the solutions in *Eternal Threads* are generally found by forcing the cast to confront their own inner traumas. Neil has a nasty temper rooted in a very tender

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A time-travelling detective game in a burnt-down apartment building

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Cosmonaut Studios

PUBLISHER
Secret Mode

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070 Super, Intel Core i7-9700 @ 3.00GHz, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
eternalthreadsgame.com

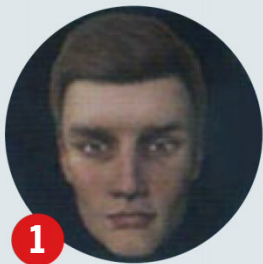
sorrow, Raquel needs to stop blaming herself for something that is not her fault, etc. The plot is conveniently structured so that when each of these characters achieves their own self-actualisation, they're miraculously able to escape the building when the flames break out. Still, I enjoyed following their journeys, and mending the fences they couldn't fix themselves. *Eternal Threads* bakes in a few points of intrigue along the way – seriously, what's up with that door in the basement? – but there are no macabre curveballs buried in the code. Do not expect to uncover an arsonist in our midst.

MUNDANE MEDDLING

There is some detective work to be done here. When you explore the apartments you'll be prompted to pick up notes, postcards and smartphones – all of which contain important contextual information – which fill out the riddle. (It reminded me a bit of *Gone Home*.) But *Eternal Threads* does not leave much meat on the bone for straight-up, gumshoe-style deduction. The true ending, which I achieved, came into focus pretty naturally by simply watching all the scenes, and editing the junction points that looked unsatisfying. The door I referred to

TIME TO PROCESS

The characters of *Eternal Threads*, ranked by internalised trauma



1

NEIL

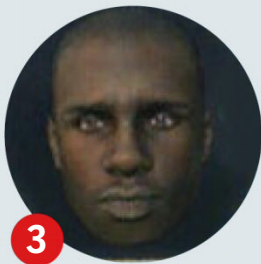
Huge temper, huge anger issues, probably needs to lay off the videogames.



2

RAQUEL

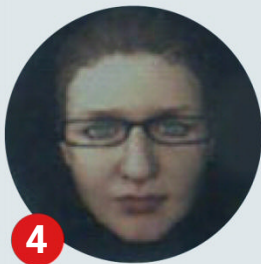
Will you please stop carrying that creepy doll everywhere?



3

TOM

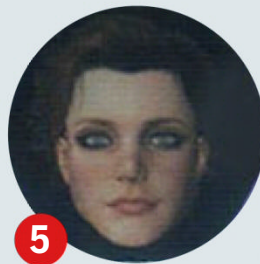
Mixed in with the wrong people. But hey, at least he's a property owner.



4

LINDA

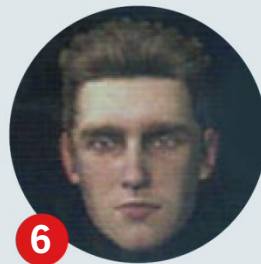
Really needs to finally kick her no-good husband to the kerb.



5

JENNY

She'd be fine if she couldn't sense the paranormal.



6

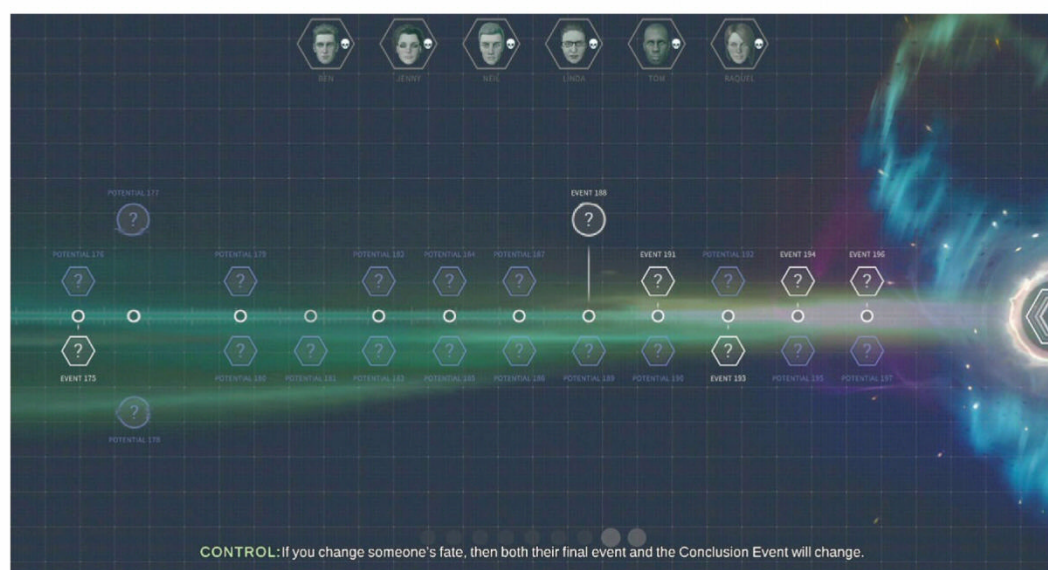
BEN

Literally the only well-adjusted member of the group.

Sci-fi trappings
elevate an
emotional story.



LINDA: Well that, along with your excellent bedside manner with the young lady in pyjamas.



ABOVE: Scan the timeline for important branching points.

RIGHT: Things can get heated between the characters.



Casing the joint.



ABOVE: Here's a slightly different example of things getting heated.

earlier? You find the key to it after one of the characters just... announces where it is. Cosmonaut clearly wants to tell a story first and foremost – your actions as the player are secondary.

That lack of satisfaction permeated through the finale, which left off on a wild cliffhanger that, I suppose, will be cleared up in a potential sequel. Personally, I hope they get another bite at the apple. The *Eternal Threads* format could, I think, be adapted well to a number of other settings. The scope is already so small – the whole map consists of about ten rooms and six primary

characters – and it's easy to imagine it expanding further into the unruly, crisscrossing vectors of temporal fiction. I wanted *Eternal Threads* to make me feel a bit more clever than it did, but it never stopped holding my hand. Let me make my own blunders. After all, isn't messing things up while trying to fix them what good time travel stories are all about? ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A promising time-travel mystery that doesn't quite give players a truly mind-melting temporal puzzle.

72

OVER-SCOPED

SNIPER ELITE 5 isn't a misfire but it struggles to hit its mark

By Samantha Greer

Five games deep, *Sniper Elite* delivers what I consider to be its best instalment since the original thanks to the influence of games like *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* and the *Hitman* reboots. Yet a total lack of confidence in its core sniping conceit, as well as a truly dire story, drag down what should be a more enjoyable stealth game.

It's probably not what a lot of people coming to *Sniper Elite 5* care about, but someone at Rebellion was intent on cramming numerous cutscenes into this thing, and they are all, without exception, duller than the dead eyes of the Nazis left in the wake of protagonist Karl Fairburne. This macho American commando and sniper is a videogame gruff-man so generic he feels like he didn't even get to the end of the assembly line of the factory where they make these cookie cutter men. It's not impossible to imbue a Nazi killing machine with inner life and depth – BJ Blazkowicz from *Wolfenstein* is subversive with his well of introspection. Karl is boilerplate, and everything he says washes over me like white noise.

Well everything except those moments of unintentional comedy, like at the game's outset where, after seeing their submarine destroyed, Karl utters, "Nazi bastards," while a

sad accordion plays. Accordions! Get it? Because it's set in France!

LOST ACTION HERO

The choices of the game's musical score are a not so subtle hint

towards the level *Sniper Elite* is working on. It's the Second World War through the eyes of a teenage boy. Which doesn't matter in the grand scheme of shooting Nazis, but it certainly holds it back from

having much in the way of character or tone. Never tongue-in-cheek enough to pull off the macabre humour of *Hitman*, or serious enough to engage with the realities of occupied France.

The French Resistance are present throughout, and every time they showed up I couldn't help but wonder why they weren't the star of the show. Why weren't we some under-resourced sniper, having to use their wit and cunning to overcome the powerful Nazi war

The Second World War through the eyes of a teenage boy

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stealth action game with a focus on sniping

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Rebellion

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce GTX-970, Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
sniperelite.com

machine? Someone with personal stakes and ties to the country? It's such a clear way to breathe some life into proceedings. But for whatever reason, the series seems married to the bargain bin action man.

It doesn't help that *Sniper Elite 5* puts its worst foot forward, with a tiresome tutorial. But once it finally opens up, you can at least begin to enjoy what the game does best: picking a roost and shooting bad guys from really far away. It's not open world, however much the expansive landscapes conjure up the notion. In fact, you frequently feel railroaded by the levels, with numerous invisible walls and awkward barricades. No matter how open the areas seem, they're always far more linear in practice.

Not that they're bereft of choice, and in truth the more limited scope allows the game to funnel players into interesting obstacles. Rather than picking a perfect hill and performing long distance brain surgery from safety, you're pressed into taking risks to manoeuvre around patrols and reach vantages undetected. The pay-off of a secret tunnel or climbable ledge feel earned instead of laid at your feet.

The third mission, Spy Academy, set at Mont Saint Michel, an island well-defended from the outside world, is maybe the highlight of the whole game. Here, sometimes even obvious sniper spots like a church tower turn out to be duds, and it means that you often have to pay real attention instead of going through the motions.

NO HIT, MAN

While *Sniper Elite 5*'s levels fall short of the *Hitman* games from which it has taken blatant influence, they nonetheless play with more than just popping heads off. While not as open as they seem, these levels are sprawling labyrinths full of little choke points and secrets worth exploiting. You can even stage

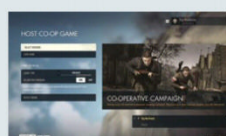
MISSION BRIEFING

Sniper Elite 5 has a surprisingly wide offering of modes



SINGLE-PLAYER CAMPAIGN

The whole solo campaign will probably take about a dozen hours to finish.



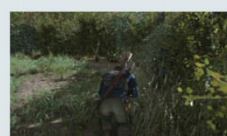
CO-OPERATIVE CAMPAIGN

The single-player story can be played with friends and it entirely changes the way you play.



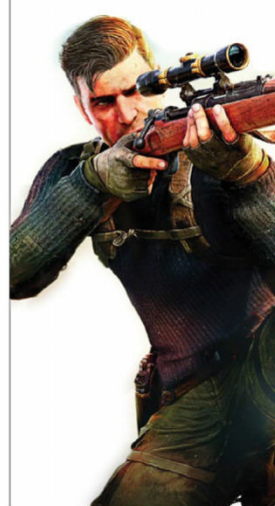
SURVIVAL

Solo or with friends, this mode lets you battle against endless waves of Nazi soldiers, and it's a lot of fun.



AXIS INVASION

Invade other players' games as an enemy sniper, waiting out somewhere in the level for them. *Dark Souls* with guns.



A tower isn't always the best vantage anymore.

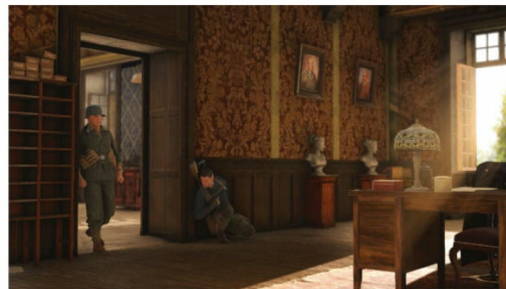


The game takes cues from Hitman but doesn't really measure up.



LEFT: Level chokeholds produce nail-biting little moments.

BELOW: At its best, the game is expansive, spectacular, and tense.



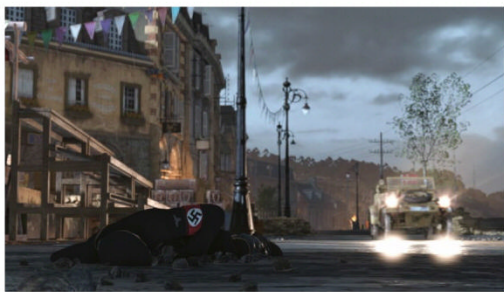


Why didn't we play as the Resistance?



RIGHT: Whatever its shortcomings, it's satisfying to put down a Nazi.

BELOW: Close quarters battles are not the game's strong suit.



» ‘accidents’ in certain locations, though disappointingly the game’s AI doesn’t recognise it as such and views any death as proof a sniper is in the vicinity. But still, having various options available makes levels more fun to exploit, even if the lack of a real atmosphere or a sense these soldiers doing anything besides waiting for you to show up, means there’s less thrill in your trespassing.

In one level I timed it so that a mine I planted would be set off by an incoming patrol car *after* I took out a sniper under the noise of a low flying plane for cover, distracting nearby guards while I sprinted behind enemy lines. Rare as these moments are, they sure are incredibly satisfying.

But there is a sense that the game is lesser for this variety. Rather than doing one thing exceptionally well, it’s done a handful of things moderately well. When I think of the best depictions of sniping that game’s have crafted, I think of things like *Call of Duty Modern Warfare’s* ‘All Ghillied Up’ and ‘One Shot. One Kill’ levels. Linear, set-piece driven design of course, but they emphasise stealth and patience, setting up for one all important shot rather than exterminating loads of grunts. *Sniper Elite 5* sometimes feels like it’s embarrassed of the sniping, worried you’ll get bored. I don’t need games to simulate the full idea of staking out a single target, but surely they can have me do more than be a second-hand Sam Fisher?

KILLER SIGHTS

The X-ray kill camera feels like an attempt to add unnecessary spectacle into the art of sniping. It’s become the series’ calling card since the second game. Yet in a story so lacking in meaningful tone, they struggle in finding their place. Are they meant to be gleeful and over-the-top like *Mortal Kombat* fatalities? The kills are far too straightforward for that. Perhaps a pointed reminder of the suffering you’re inflicting? Not when the game treats exploding testicles like the world’s greatest punchline.

The X-ray kills are indicative of so many of the series’ problems. Latching onto a single awkward but standout feature, in place of anything genuinely novel, while failing to

figure out what exactly it is they’re actually going for.

Even the skill trees speak to a lack of thought, offering up perks that scarcely change how you’ll play the game. An extra tool here, a bit more health there. It all feels redundant in a way that speaks to the lack of fundamentally different options available. The game might force you

to spend more time creeping around in close quarters, but it’s not something it does especially well. Even by comparison to the decades old *Splinter Cell* titles, *Sniper Elite 5’s* close encounters feel clunky and basic.

No wall splits here.

The mixture of near and far objectives leaves the game feeling at odds with itself. After all, it’s not called *Sniper and Sneaking into Buildings to Grab Documents Elite*. The thrill of judging a shot, observing the wind and distance, estimating the right adjustments – this is what the game excels at. Following it up with clunky close quarters stealth only diminishes the good.

FIRING BLIND

Difficulty options really help bring out that good however. Like most

modern stealth games (or even maybe games in general), *Sniper Elite* is overburdened with information. You can tag and track enemies, be aware when they’ve nearly spotted you, have an assist on your sniping... at every turn the game slaps on some training wheels and expects you to feel empowered. It causes a lack of tension that can thankfully be recovered by tinkering around in the difficulty options.

You can strip the game way down. Next to no HUD, no assists, smarter enemies, no way to track foes except remembering what you’ve seen. It’s harder obviously, but it’s more interesting. With all those assists on I felt terribly bored by the lack of friction or challenge. My advice? Put as much on ‘authentic’ as you can and take your time with it, for a much more memorable experience where you’ll really have to engage with what you’re seeing and hearing.

Those options aren’t the game’s only shake-up. Co-op returns, and it quite radically changes how *Sniper Elite* is played, allowing synchronous take downs and co-ordination that gives the game a whole new dimension. Then there’s the new Invasion mode, a *Dark Souls*-esque system where players can enter other’s games as an Axis sniper. It brings a real Enemy at the Gates energy which adds way more tension than the offline game can provide, as you suddenly have to slow down your pace and duel it out with a real, thinking enemy instead of the slightly dim AI. No tricking an enemy player by chucking a bottle off into the distance. If the thought of strangers waiting out in the bushes is a little much, you can turn it off completely. That said, it’d be a shame to not engage with the multiplayer side of things, because I think even the game itself undersells how much this feature enhance the overall experience.

Under the right circumstances *Sniper Elite 5* is a decent, occasionally great, stealth game which is surprising enough to give it an edge but too inconsistent to keep it. It wisely has its eye on the competition; it just can’t quite hit the mark. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

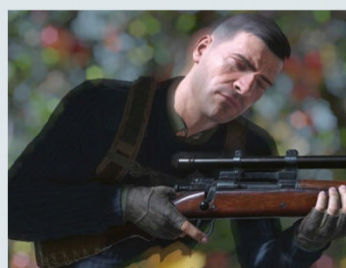
Sniper Elite 5 is a quality step-up for the series that’s unfortunately still rather short of stealth game greatness.

71

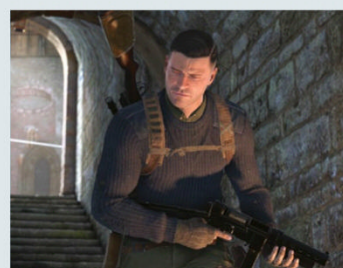
The kill camera feels like an attempt to add unnecessary spectacle

THE INNER LIFE OF KARL FAIRBURNE

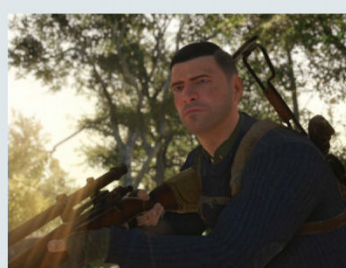
Who is this international man of mystery?



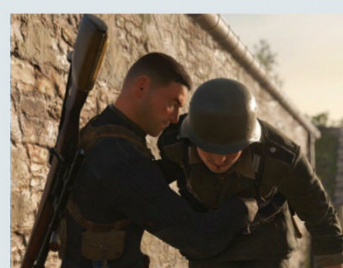
1 When alone, Karl likes to whisper sweet nothings to his favourite rifle.



2 Karl thinks back fondly on a Nazi skull exploding. Then he thinks about Nazi balls.



3 Karl loves to spend time in nature, where he can admire all the concealed hiding spots.



4 Karl whispers helpful advice to his enemies, like, “Try to be knife proof pal.”

FALSE TEETH

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE: SWANSONG is a choose-'em-up with charmless characters

By Rick Lane

The virtual legacy of *Vampire: The Masquerade* is patchy to say the least, but the tabletop RPG did inspire one of the best-written videogames of all time. 2004's *Bloodlines* was a sultry, humorous, and delightfully twisted portrayal of Los Angeles' undead underbelly, filled to bursting with weird and wonderful characters. It may have been buggier than a rotting corpse, but it excelled at making vampires seem sexy, scary, and above all, strange.

Vampire: The Masquerade: Swansong does the complete opposite. Its cabal of backstabbing bloodsuckers are painfully boring, frequently stupid, and exhibit all the charisma of a Nosferatu living in a bin. Big Bad Wolf's narrative RPG has grand ambitions and spots of potential, but it all falls apart in a mess of half-baked ideas and a script sucked dry of personality.

Setting its vampire story in Boston, *Swansong* sees you play as three different vampires, all high-ranking members of the Camarilla (a sort of cross between a governing body and the Mafia). Emem is a politically ambitious vampire who struggles with authority, while Galeb is a suave and loyal Camarilla henchman. Finally, there's Leysha, who has recently awoken from three years in hibernation due to the debilitating mental illness that commonly afflicts her Malkavian clan.

REALITY BITES

The decision to focus on a trio of characters makes for a confusing opening. *Swansong* gives a rapid-fire overview of the three perspectives, while simultaneously introducing the rest of the Camarilla court and sketching out the off-screen events that kickstart the plot. Gradually, it becomes clear that a party organised by the Camarilla to seal an

alliance with a group of thaumaturges (vampire warlocks) has been attacked by unknown assailants, and the head of the Boston Camarilla, Hazel Iversen, dispatches the trio on separate missions to investigate.

Structurally, *Swansong*'s closest living relative is *Life is Strange*, combining elaborate dialogue sequences with third-person exploration and puzzle solving. The systems behind both are more involved than *Life is Strange*, in ways that I'll get into later. But none of it ultimately matters because the most

Swansong's dialogue is flatter than a hedgehog on a highway

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT?**
A vampire narrative adventure full of choices and consequences
- EXPECT TO PAY**
£50
- DEVELOPER**
Big Bad Wolf Interactive
- PUBLISHER**
Nacon
- REVIEWED ON**
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia RTX 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM
- MULTIPLAYER**
No
- LINK**
vampire-swansong.com

crucial element in *Swansong*'s design – the writing – is devastatingly bland.

To begin with, the script is almost entirely humourless. Nearly every character is droningly serious, delivering exposition in thick, flavourless spoonfuls like cod liver oil. This isn't to say that everyone should be quipping like they're in a Marvel movie, but compared to the fireworks-display of a script that *Bloodlines* has, *Swansong*'s dialogue is flatter than a hedgehog on a highway.

The bigger problem, however, is how muted each character's personality is. Galeb is a vampiric Agent 47, with a persona that runs little deeper than his suit. In fact, 47 is arguably the more expressive of the two, as at least he'll crack the odd pun while he's garrotting some trust-fund ghoul. Emem's rebellious streak, meanwhile, mostly manifests in petulant whining that makes her difficult to empathise with. Leysha is the strongest character, with her polite, slightly anxious demeanour masking a deep psychological instability. Unfortunately, she's accompanied by a profoundly irritating child vampire called Halsey, and her arc revolves largely around her affection for the bothersome goblin she calls "sugar fangs".

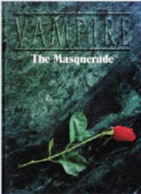
SWANNING AROUND

The lacklustre writing undermines the rest of the game, which is a shame, as there is some ambition on show. Narrative choices are both extensive and genuinely affect the trajectory of the plot. In an early example, Emem heads to the base of the warlocks to attempt a reconciliation, but ends up tossed in their dungeon. She eventually escapes, and can head straight for a confrontation with the warlock's leader. But a little exploration reveals a new character, and a potentially very different outcome to both the scene and the entire story.

There are also some decent ideas explored in the story itself. The

ETERNAL LIFE?

Vampire: The Masquerade has a long association with videogames



1991
Vampire: The Masquerade TTRPG



2000
Vampire: The Masquerade - Redemption



2004
Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines

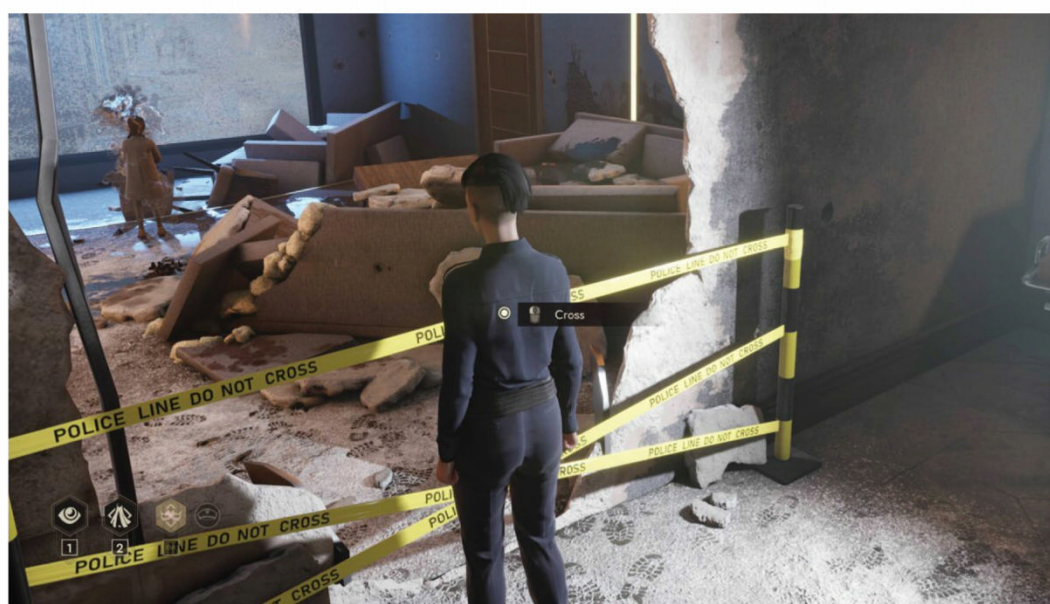
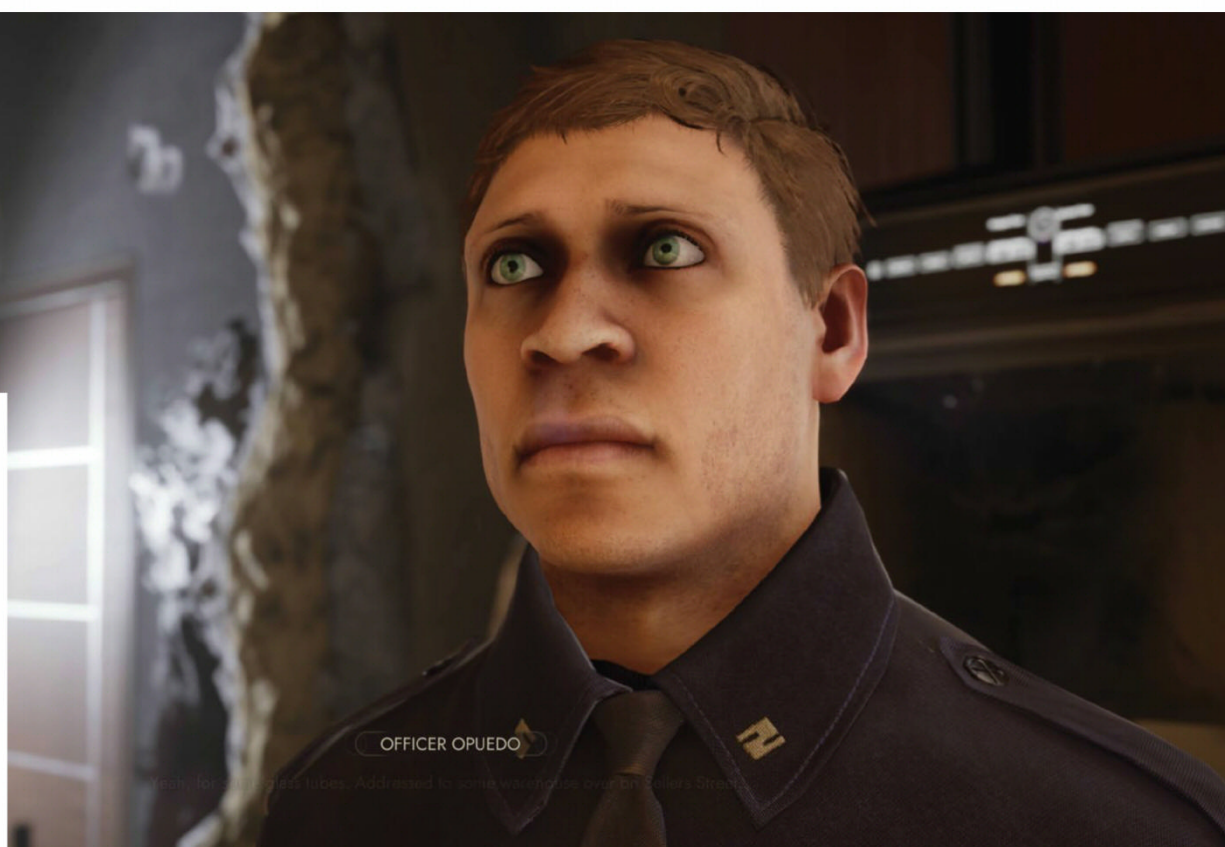
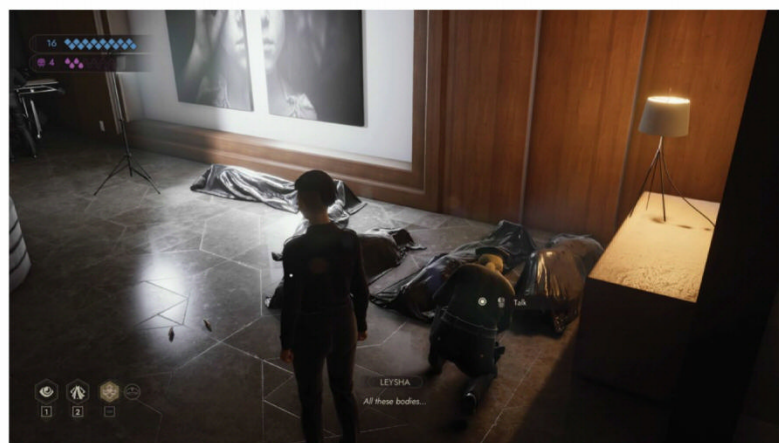


2022
Vampire: The Masquerade - Swansong



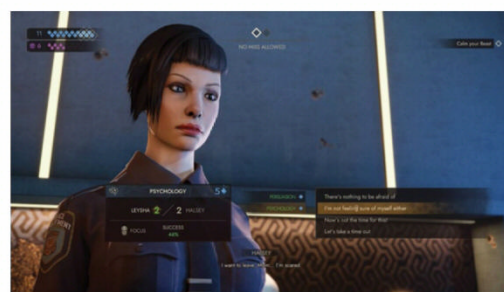
TBC
Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines 2

Proof, if it was needed, that cops are Neanderthals.



FAR LEFT: *Swansong* is probably at its strongest as a detective game.

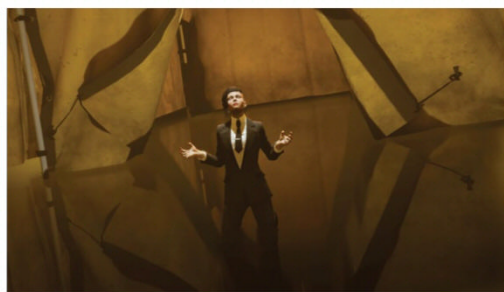
BELOW: The Red Salon is one of the game's prettier locations.





ABOVE: Hazel Iversen is the enigmatic 'Prince' of the Boston Camarilla.

BELOW: The voice actor actually says "Calvary".



Using powers increases your hunger, which can be reduced by feeding.



central mystery surrounding who's behind the attack is intriguing, while the character conflicts produce some stimulating drama. The strongest of these is Leysha's toxic relationship with her vampire therapist. The concept of a vampire therapist is probably the closest to a joke that *Swansong* gets, but his disturbingly domineering demeanour toward Leysha overrides the inherent absurdity in the idea, and their storyline delivers the best twists in the game.

Sadly, these are isolated highlights, scattered canapés in an otherwise lukewarm buffet of ideas. Outside of the writing, *Swansong*'s biggest problem is that inhabiting its vampires is not much fun. Each character has a skill-tree that covers dialogue, skills like deduction and lockpicking, and clan-specific vampire powers. The intent is to let you tailor each character in highly specific ways. But the XP needed to upgrade these abilities is tied to how well you perform in each scene. Given that each character only has a handful across the game's 15-hour-length, this means that one badly handled scene can hamper that character's progression.

While this issue can be avoided with good fortune, a harder flaw is how trite some of the game's dialogue sequences are. Key exchanges in *Swansong* are known as confrontations, wherein you need to verbally defeat your opponent in a protracted argument with multiple phases. But rather than saving this system for the most significant story beats, *Swansong* often applies it to trivial buntfights. One 'confrontation' sees Galeb, a century-old vampire whose clan's entire shtick is using people like puppets, struggling to convince a parking attendant to open some locked garbage containers. Said parking attendant is admittedly a 'thin-blood' vampire, but it's hardly a thrilling premise for a battle of wills.

The overall quality of each scene also varies significantly. When he isn't shouting at people in a car park, Galeb's chapters are by far the best in the game. The first sees him trawling through a lavish penthouse apartment, attempting to solve the murder of a decapitated businessman. It's a well-constructed detective puzzle with a clever final

twist. The second is (somewhat fittingly) reminiscent of *Hitman*'s Hokkaido level, with Galeb exploring a large subterranean facility where there are multiple solutions to the puzzle presented to you.

Not all the chapters are so rewarding. Emem's two major scenes are also the weakest. The warlock dungeon looks cool, but the action

mostly centres around some weirdly implemented platforming and an annoying pattern-matching puzzle. Her second act sees you snooping around a dingy back lot trying to get some biker

vampires to join your crew.

Swansong doesn't do much to represent Boston

SING FOR YOUR SUPPER

Indeed, you may have noticed by this point that *Swansong* isn't very... vampire-y. You occasionally get to feed on humans to boost one of your ability bars, but the way this is implemented in the game's limited spaces makes the mechanic feel crowbarred in. There are also some truly bizarre one-off conundrums that appear to have been lifted from '90s adventure games.

The worst example of these appears in Leysha's second chapter, where she needs to escape from the basement of a bar prowled by armed mercenaries. It's worth noting that

Leysha's Malkavian abilities let her turn herself invisible and mimic the appearance of other people, meaning she's more than equipped for stealth and subterfuge. But instead of building escape routes around these abilities, *Swansong* finds an excuse to nullify these powers, then contrives the stupidest puzzle since *Gabriel Knight 3*'s cat-hair moustache.

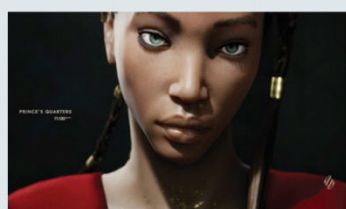
Are you ready for this? It's a doozy. The guard blocking your way just happens to be stood beneath a pipe that's venting boiling-hot steam. Despite scalding his big bald bonce, the guard refuses to move from the doorway, but also refuses to wear the ballistic helmet all the mercenaries have been issued, instead setting it aside on some crates. To escape the area, you need to find a way to increase the steam pressure until it poaches his head like an egg and kills him. Bear in mind that this is a very serious vampire RPG, and not a rejected *Monkey Island* game.

At least *Swansong* looks nice. Sometimes. Areas like the Red Salon bar let the designers have a bit of fun, although much of the game takes place either in nondescript rich-person apartments, or grey concrete interiors like sewers or ventilation systems. Also, aside from a couple of skyline panoramas, *Swansong* doesn't do much to represent Boston as a place. You don't get a sense of the city's unique history and architecture.

Ultimately, *Swansong* doesn't seem to know what kind of game it wants to be. It's a talking simulator, a detective game, a classically styled adventure puzzler, and a diet *Hitman* sandbox. There's even a late-game stealth section that's mechanically detached from the rest of the experience. As abruptly introduced stealth sections in non-stealth games go, it isn't terrible. But I'd trade it and so much else for a stripped-back, Telltale-style story that frontloaded *Swansong*'s narrative choices, or a dedicated supernatural detective game. Or just a game that didn't make being a vampire feel like such a chore. Between this and the missing-in-action *Bloodlines 2*, Vampire: The Masquerade's heyday feels more distant than ever. ■

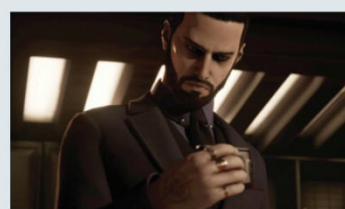
CLANTASTIC

The key clans you'll encounter in Swansong



TREADOR

Essentially the sexy vampires. Typically known for their good looks, high speed and agility.



VENTRUE

The vampire elites. Can bend people to their will with the Dominate ability.



MALKAVIAN

Malkavians are expert manipulators, but are predisposed to hallucinations.



NOSFERATU

Cursed with ghoulish features, Nosferatu are forbidden from venturing out in public.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Swansong offers a flexible story, but that can't save it from its mediocre writing and scattershot game design.

50

BLADE ROLLER

Using dice to escape Deckard in cyberpunk RPG **CITIZEN SLEEPER**

By Jody Macgregor

Citizen Sleeper is like Blade Runner, but you're the replicant on the run. A synthetic being who has escaped from the corporation that built you, you hide on a space station that's become a rogue state – home to revolutionaries, refugees, and a pirate gang. While you're worrying about whether you'll be hunted down and dramatically shot in the back, you're also worried about day-to-day survival.

The game is great at encouraging you to live a routine. Where in *Cyberpunk 2077* I only went to bed if I was trying to trigger a sidequest, here I lived a day-to-day cycle that included sleeping, eating, working, and feeding a stray cat. Some of it was mechanically necessary, some was pure roleplay.

Every morning you roll a pool of action dice, each of which can be spent on a task, like working a shift at the shipyard or exploring a new area of the station. The higher the number, the better you'll do. Lower numbers aren't useless, however. In the data cloud, where your consciousness floats free of the synthmeat that needs to eat and sleep, you hack systems by matching numbers rather than

having high ones. I can spend a one seeing what this agent of the Yatagan gang is up to, or I could duck out of the cloud and spend it working a shift at the noodle bar, where even if I do a bad job at least I'll get to eat a few noodles and get back some energy.

So it's not all Blade Runner. *Citizen Sleeper* ended up reminding me of *Planetes*, a series about blue-collar workers who collect garbage in space. Like *Planetes*, *Citizen Sleeper* is focused on ordinary people. Exploring the

station introduces new characters, depicted in expressive anime portraits beside blocks of text telling their stories with choice-and-consequence moments of interaction.

Those stories unfold over time. The UI tells you how many cycles

I hit the credits three times finding multiple endings

before their next chapter begins, so while waiting you go back to work at the bar or the farmstacks, and try not to fall apart. Thanks to planned obsolescence, your condition stat constantly decays. As it ticks down you get less dice. The stabiliser you need to refill your condition is expensive, and hard to source. Like a mobile phone or a lightbulb, you're not made to last.

Additional pressure is provided by the hunters. The corporation or their freelancers will track you down eventually, and every hack you perform gives the bestial artificial intelligence that patrols cyberspace another whiff of your scent.

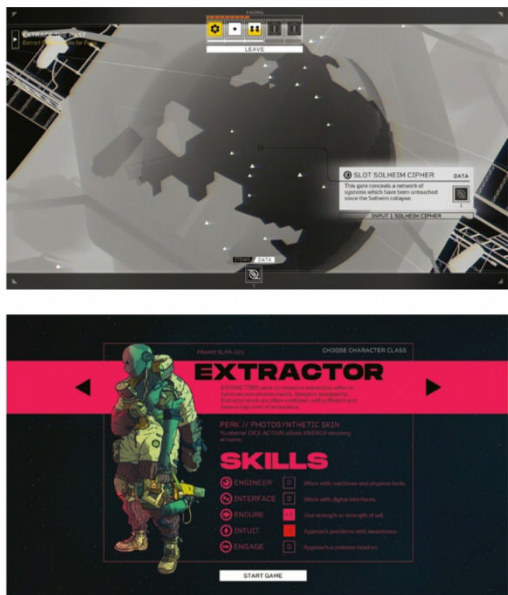
WAKE UP, TIME TO DICE

As *Citizen Sleeper* goes on you get better at exploiting its systems, finding solutions to these problems. I made money playing a game called tavla at the Tambour Tearoom and got my mushroom farm set up nicely. I even moved out of the shipping container I slept in.

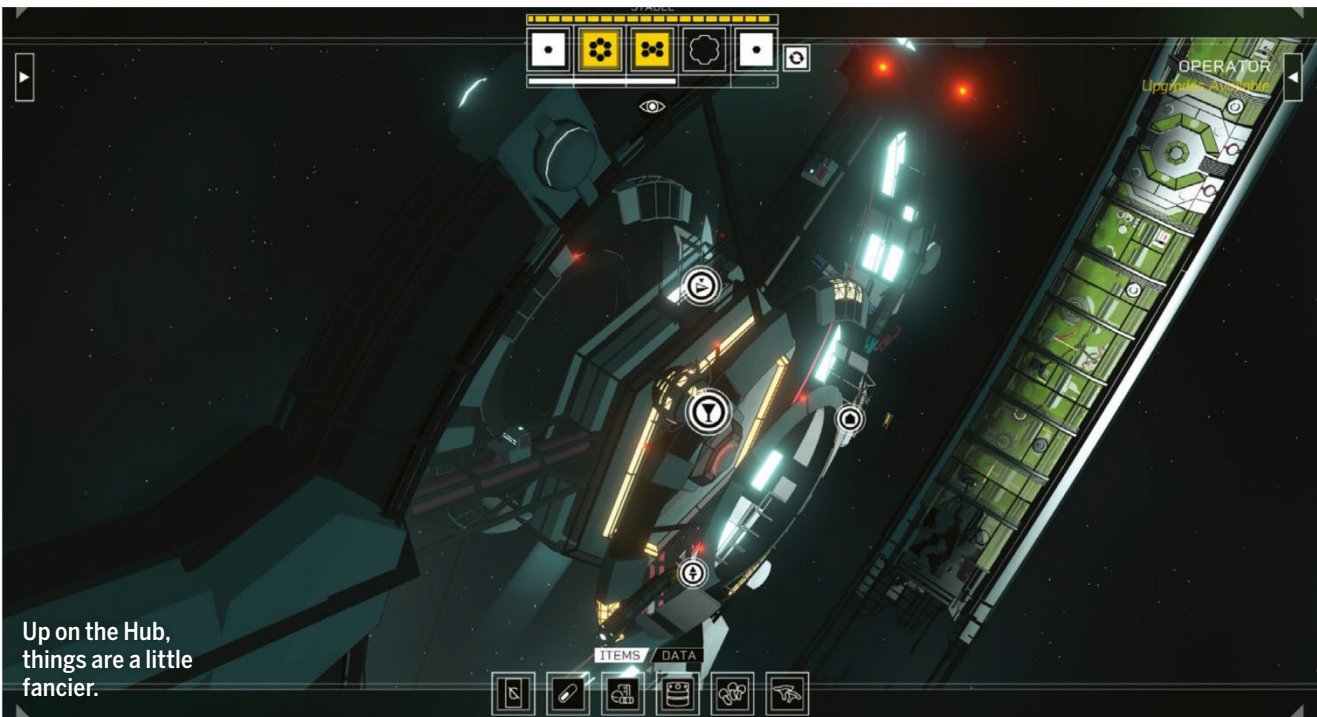
It started to feel like I was sequence-breaking *Citizen Sleeper* when I'd find storylines I was clearly intended to discover sooner, that

NEED TO KNOW

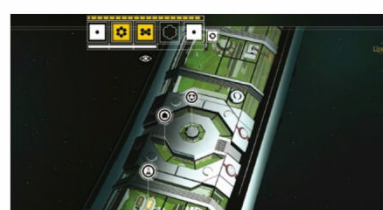
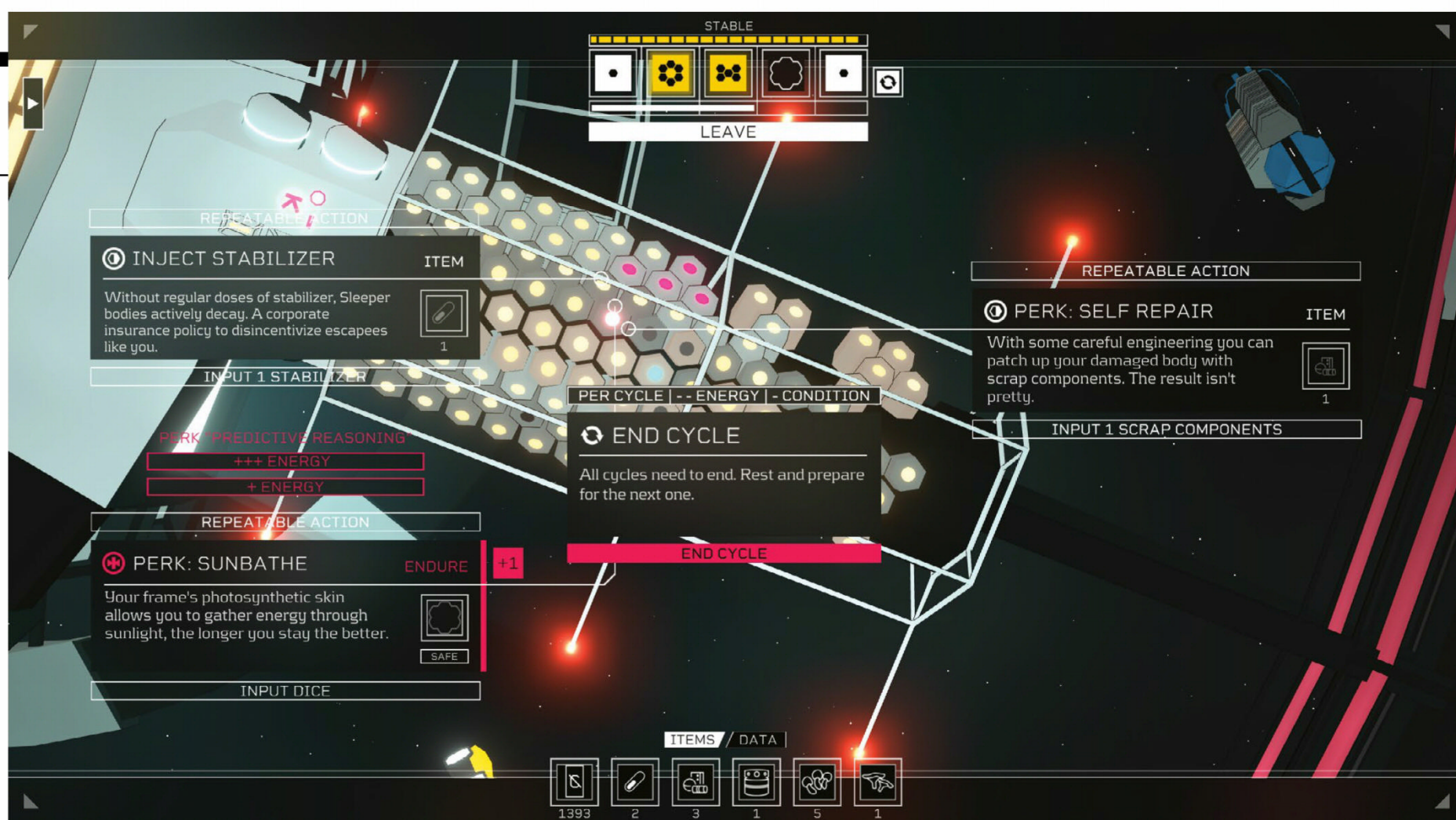
- WHAT IS IT?**
A dice-spending RPG about struggling to survive in a space station city
- EXPECT TO PAY**
£15
- DEVELOPER**
Jump Over the Age
- PUBLISHER**
Fellow Traveller
- REVIEWED ON**
Windows 10, Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, RTX 3080
- MULTIPLAYER**
No
- LINK**
bit.ly/3x58PhC



ABOVE: Extractor is the only class whose special ability is 'sunbathe'.



Up on the Hub, things are a little fancier.



TOP: Mostly, you'll be staring at menus like these.

ABOVE: The Greenway is where the station's farmstacks have gone feral.

RIGHT: This shipping container will be home for a while.

would assume I didn't have certain items or hadn't been to certain places. That said, the writing is excellent, bar some stiff dialogue where characters avoid abbreviations. All the focus on the mundane, the scavenging and surviving, makes the occasional glimpse of something profound feel potent – perhaps a poetic description of the flowing data cloud and the impossible entities who live in it, or the endless physical space the station spins in, and the tiny individuals who find hope there.

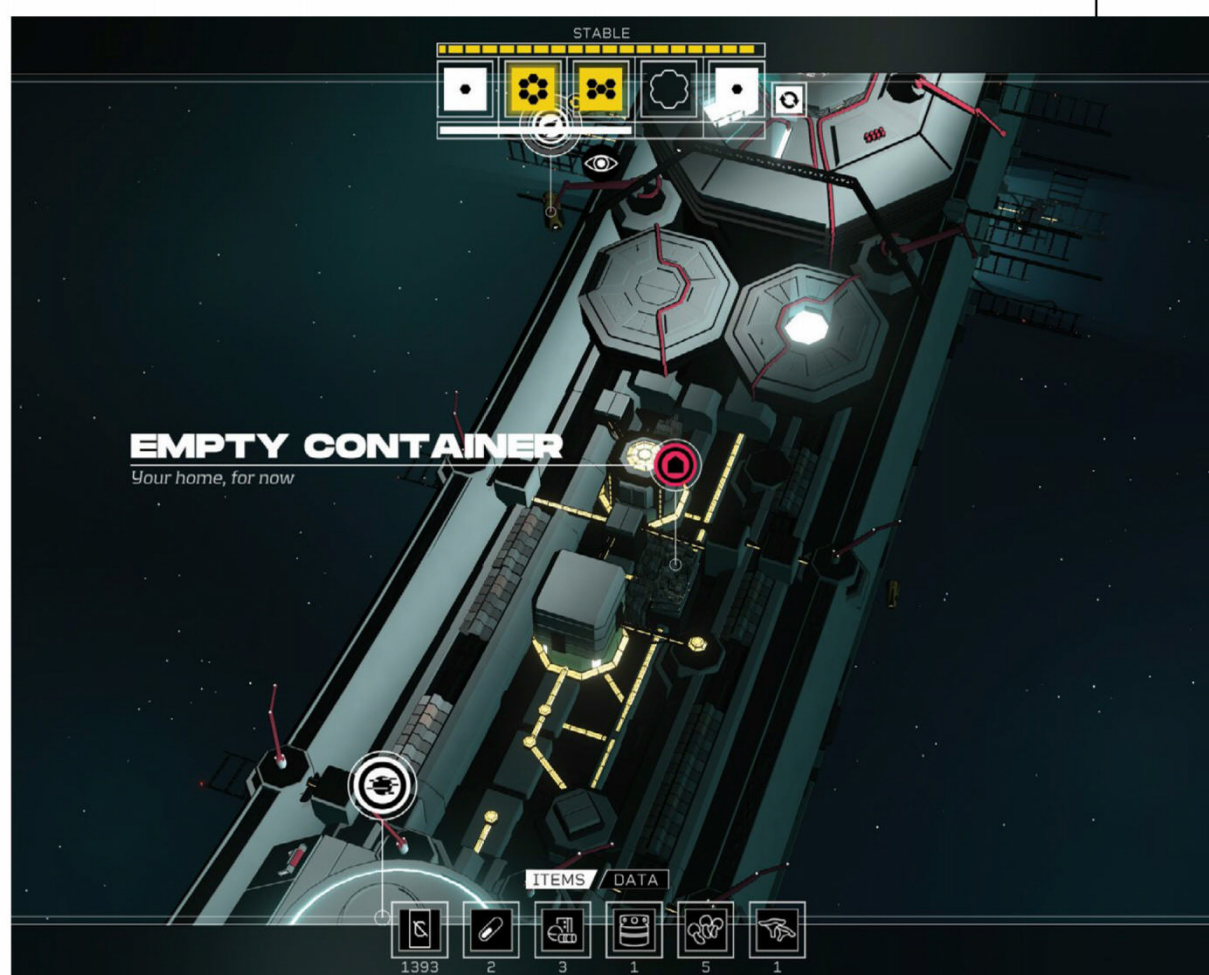
Citizen Sleeper has multiple endings, and you can continue playing to find others. By the time I was done I hadn't seen any attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion, but I had freed an AI from a vending machine, foiled a couple of corporate schemes to get toeholds on the station, and renovated a bar. I didn't want to leave, and I hit the credits three times finding multiple endings in one playthrough.

That's the best recommendation I can really give for *Citizen Sleeper*. It let me build a life I wanted to keep living. When I go, who will harvest the mushrooms? And who will feed that stray cat? ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

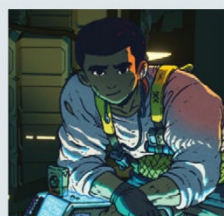
Citizen Sleeper is an incredibly evocative life-sim RPG, and one that you won't want to wake up from.

80

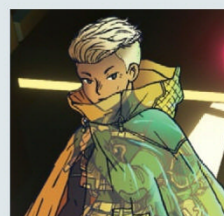


FINE FOLK

Some of the people you'll meet in space



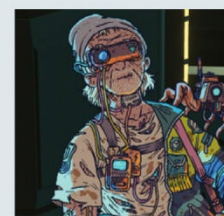
FENG
An engineer who promises to help disable the tracker inside you, but only if you'll help him with some revolutionary hacking.



SABINE
A doctor who can source the stabiliser you need to survive, with an office that's guarded by an imposing gang enforcer.



EMPHIS
Runs a food stand where he fries fungus. This is one cyberpunk dystopia where people do eat something other than noodles.



DRAGOS
The drone operator who finds you frozen in a freighter on arrival, Dragos helps you in return for assistance with his scavenging work.

GET LOST

UNEXPLORED 2 struggles to hit its stride

By Kerry Brunskill

I've wandered into a stranger's camp in the wilderness when some curious quest text pops up, "Sing a song." How can I resist? *Unexplored 2*'s role play systems spring to life, and with them I guide my Wayfarer through a series of minor musical successes until they deliver what I'm told, via flavour text, is a loud rendition of a popular ditty. The applause for my impromptu performance isn't exactly deafening, but it is enough to secure me a place by the campfire for the night.

When I'm not singing, my roguelite avatar is busy lugging modifier-laden equipment around a hostile, procedurally generated land in the hopes of destroying a magical object to save the world. It's all a bit Lord of the Rings, but *Unexplored 2* is inspired by Tolkien in a way most fantasy games aren't. Rather than subject me to another round of orc wars, hot elves, and magic swords with funny names, *Unexplored 2* instead focuses on my traveller's long, hard, journey, with combat being something I only resort to when I've either run out of waybread and need to hunt, or when I'm forced to defend myself.

Unfortunately those bits in the books where the characters complain about being tired and hungry aren't anyone's favourite passages. Randomised events along the way

offer brief flashes of interest, but ultimately *Unexplored 2*'s journey is channelling the filler between the good stuff, only I can't skim-read over the text when my character's cold/hot/wet/tired again – and thanks to frequent bugs I can't be sure my destination will work as intended when I finally arrive, either.

I never felt like I was defending myself against an enemy out for blood

500 MILES

Unexplored 2's twist on the classic roguelike is that the journey to destroy the Staff of Yendor could take multiple lifetimes to accomplish, so its world is persistent across generations and what I do with one adventurer can pay off in a future life. Travelling from one overworld map node to another usually triggers an event; some I have to navigate myself and some occur automatically as I pass through, but most seem to be about dodging a lot of falling rocks.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fantasy roguelite with an emphasis on exploration over combat

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Ludomotion

PUBLISHER
Big Sugar

REVIEWED ON
i7-10750H, RTX 3070 (laptop), 16GB RAM, installed on SSD

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3NYiI7M

Relentless, tediously accurate, omnipresent falling rocks. There are better moments that deliver the spark of feeling like I'm adventuring. One time a fellow traveller mentions a friendly trading post, marking its location on my map. Another time I end up cold, wet, and in desperate need of a warm campfire after a long mountain hike. Some days I'm picking my way through narrow canyons filled with dark caves and strange beasts. Combat is really rather simplistic: battle involves holding a shield in one hand and something metallic and dangerous in the other, which can be swung with a quick press of the attack button or charged up for a stronger swipe. I ended up avoiding combat not because it's risky or even because it's usually pointless (though loot is quite rare in *Unexplored 2*), but because it's repetitive and lacks a sense of weight and physical feedback. I never felt like I was defending myself against an enemy out for blood – more like the two of us were just repeating our stiff and unsatisfying attack animations at each other until we ran out of HP.

CHALLENGE ROUND

Conversations and mini role play scenarios are a much meatier part of *Unexplored 2*, combining my current Wayfarer's personal skills with a wide range of unusual status effects and a 'Fortune System' that tries to evoke the feel of a tabletop RPG. Together these things generate a malleable pool of outcomes – I might be able to intimidate a bunch of thieves out of caving my head in, but that doesn't mean I won't struggle to pick a rusty lock, especially if I'm wounded. A good trade can make me well-liked in the local area, or a clan might tolerate me wandering around their town but not allow me to sleep in the inn even when I'm exhausted or injured. One time I happened to cross a random guard who didn't like the look of an

TERRAIN TYPES

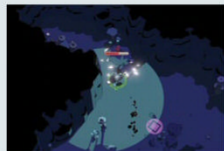
The biomes you'll encounter on your journey



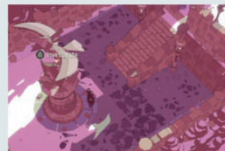
FORESTS
These lush surroundings often provide the Wayfarer with opportunities to hunt for food and rest in relative comfort.



CANYONS
Harsh and unforgiving with little in the way of flora or fauna, it's often best to pass through these areas as quickly as possible.



CAVES
These caverns are dark and dangerous places brimming with strange creatures and hazards, but they sometimes hold precious ores.



TEMPLES
Precious items and vital clues await those able to survive the tricks and traps (and bugs) found in these ancient ruins, so seek them out.

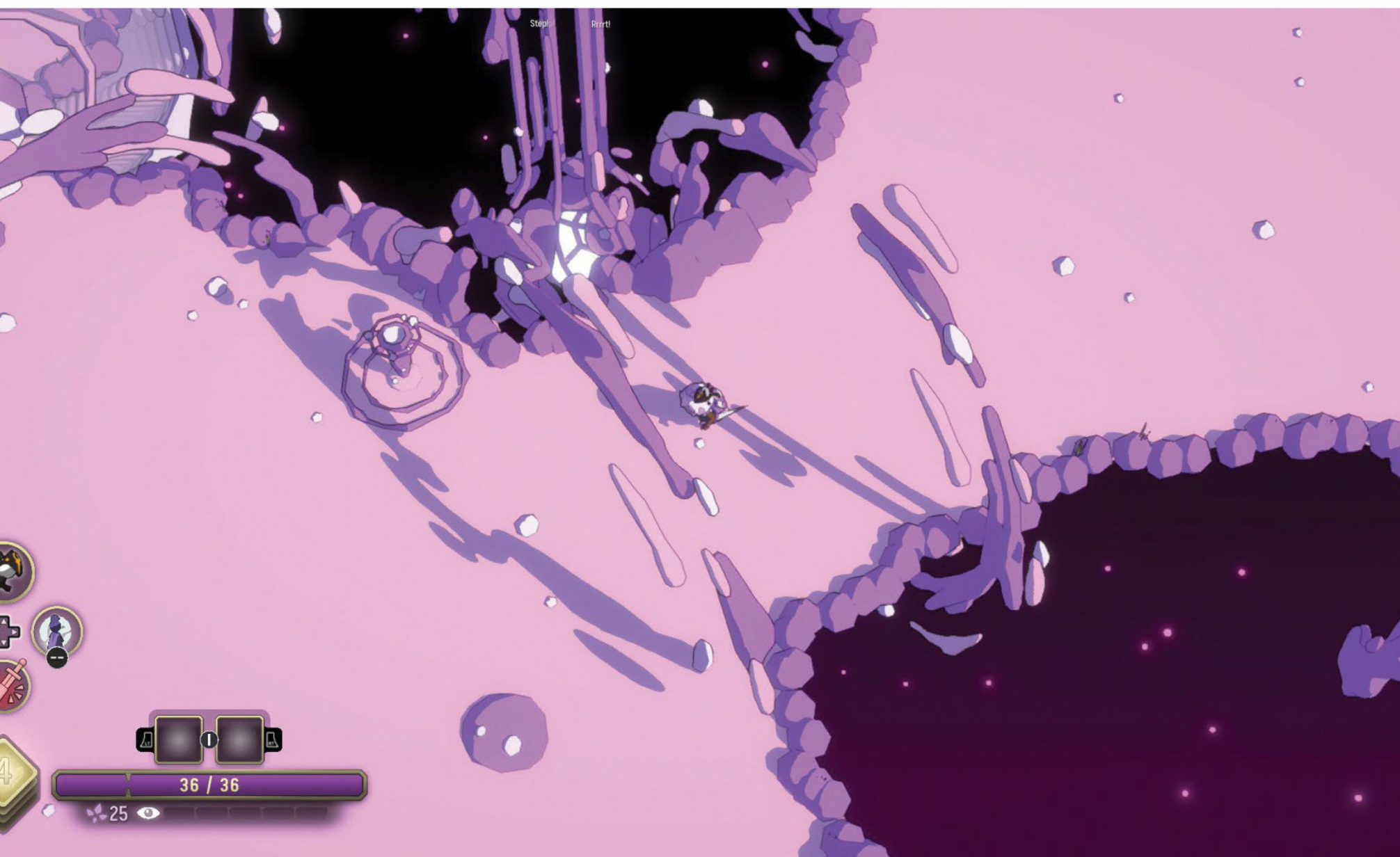


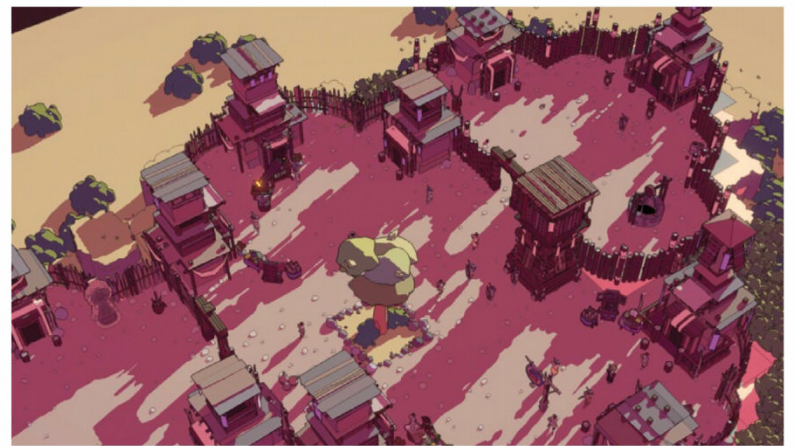
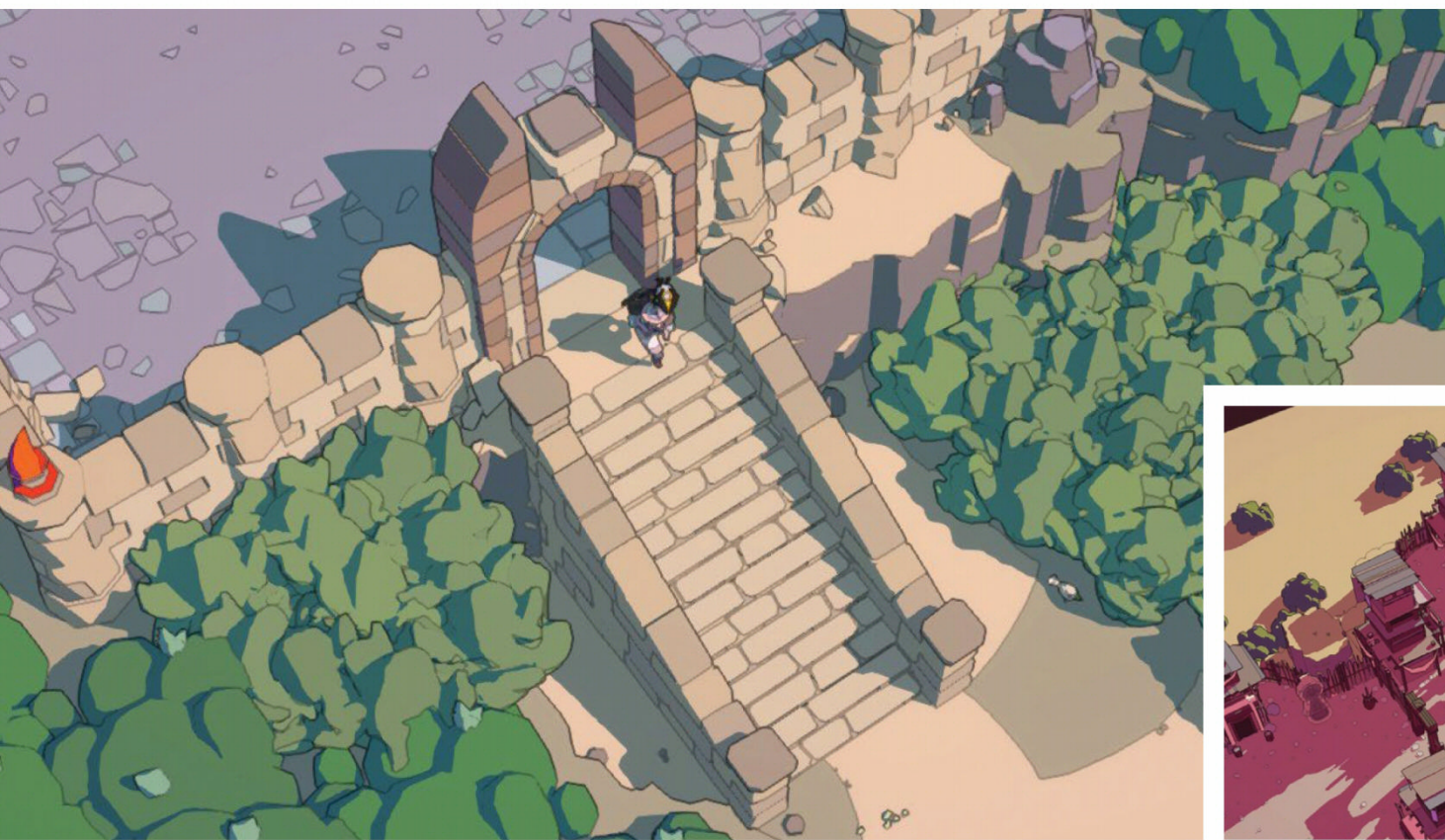


FAR LEFT: Careful route planning can make a dangerous journey less deadly.

LEFT: The Wayfarer spends a lot of time underground, dodging rocks.

BELOW: Dreamlike areas can offer swift passage – and new dangers.

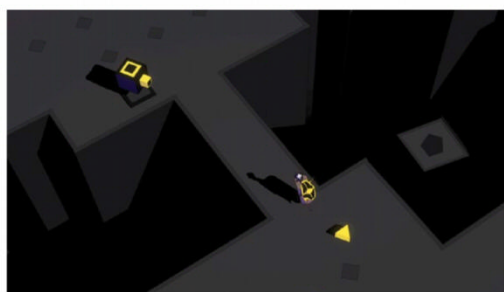




RIGHT: Rifts transport the Wayfarer to strange, geometric worlds.

FAR RIGHT: The Fortune system brings some role-playing into this roguelite.

BELOW: The Staff of Yendor can perform many powerful magics.



» outsider like myself, and since I wasn't able to sweet-talk my way out of trouble I ended up running out of town with a mob at my back.

In these fleeting moments *Unexplored 2* is alive and unpredictable, as if I'm one person walking within a world populated by countless others, one that continues to change and grow even when I'm not in it. It feels intimate and unique: my Wayfarer is an individual trying to make their way across a harsh landscape, not a cardboard hero progressing through a game. This feeling doesn't last.

500 MORE

This moment-to-moment role-playing would land better if *Unexplored 2* didn't suffer from more than a few major storytelling problems. When my quest begins the village loremaster is happy to tell me I need to take the staff to The First Valley – a place nobody knows how to get to – but not why I need to spend generations doing so. I have to find out the game's most basic goal from the quest log rather than another character or a dusty tome. Bullet points turn what should be an epic adventure into a fantasy shopping list. It's disappointing that a game that's so detailed even random farmers can form an opinion of me ends up presenting vital worldbuilding in a menu.

Unexplored 2 desperately wants to be a roguelite with a story. One where traders travel from one distant camp to another, an evil empire spreads its corrupting tendrils across the lands of the good and free, and foreboding shrines to the gods bring enlightenment. But there's neither the volume or substance of text it needs to back these ambitions up.

I've seen two separate NPCs in the same village share dialogue, one person decide they're going to dedicate years or their life to telling everyone they meet they should eat mushrooms, and spent literally a full in-game day translating the text on an ancient temple monument only to be told – and this is a direct quote after a successful attempt – “The inscription depicts the deeds of Raaf.”

At least the game's pretty enough to briefly distract me. *Unexplored 2*'s delicate lines, bold colours and alien

designs bring to mind the surreal fantasy work of French artist Moebius. Giant lily pads bob as I wade through crystal-clear water. Pond edges glowing like fire in the morning sun. Birds hop around on grassy meadows and strange flowers sparkle in the dark. These visual feasts help to silently convey the passage of time and distance, the

long shadows of a pink dusk turning into inky blue night as I sit beside a campfire.

How pretty this world looks is largely out of my – and my PC's – hands, as there are only a few basic graphic settings. There

are some general presets with single word descriptions, varying levels of MSAA and fullscreen/windowed modes and that's about it. There's no option to set a target FPS, reduce shadow detail, increase ground clutter, or anything like that.

No matter the settings I experienced some awful and unpredictable framerate drops, even when simply going down a staircase I just walked up or running across an empty pancake-flat field. The overworld map – the least graphically demanding part of the game – is no better, often stuttering as it trips over its own on-the-fly level generation.

WITHOUT A PADDLE

Unfortunately those performance issues are nothing compared to the bugs that riddle *Unexplored 2*'s core. During the introduction a wise and mysterious NPC urged me to escape to Haven before the Empire caught up with me, so imagine my surprise

when I bumped into them again in the village and had to listen to the idiot repeat the same dialogue. This happens every single time I go back to Haven. They're still loitering there weeks later, wondering why I haven't rushed off to the place we're standing in.

A 'helpful' message later popped up when I entered a new location, reminding me to take the staff to Haven – even though I was there because *I'd just finished taking the damned staff to Haven*.

Crumbling doors *Unexplored 2* tells me will buckle with sufficient force fail to react to any blow. The cave entrance in the tutorial section was half buried in a solid wall that visibly led nowhere. Getting lost once teleported my Wayfarer's icon to a void-like corner of the map.

Worse than any of those was the time, on a fresh save, *Unexplored 2* suddenly refused to let me walk more than two map nodes away from my starting point no matter how many times I trekked back and forth trying to find a route out into the larger world. This issue persisted until I travelled in a trader's caravan to nowhere in particular, which was the magical flick of a switch that made the game decide to let me walk wherever I liked, which I should've been able to do in the first place.

Trust plays a huge role in all procedurally generated games, but it's vital in a persistent world where all the machine-made locations remain the same from one character to the next. Nobody has the time to pour hours into a game that might render a major location inaccessible or leave an important character spouting nonsense somewhere they're not supposed to be.

Although future updates have been promised, the 'full release' build (the developers' own description) I was given to review was too broken to interact with as intended, and this uncertainty taints every challenge my Wayfarer faces. When things do go right I don't feel like I've overcome a new challenge in a vast and unknown world. I'm just relieved the game's actually working as intended, at least for the moment. ■

FIGHTING WORDS

Your Fortune system result can change the outcome of a tense conversation



GREAT SUCCESS

The Wayfarer is sent on their way with an apology and some waybread – sorry, their mistake.



SUCCESS

It turns out fighting the Wayfarer's not worth the time or effort. Best to move on before they change their minds, eh?



FAILURE

Blades are drawn and blood may be spilled. These thugs might retreat if the Wayfarer can do enough damage, allowing for a quick escape.



CRITICAL FAILURE

This is personal. If this group is affiliated with one of the clans, the whole clan will take a hostile stance with the Wayfarer.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Unexplored 2 has potential, but the adventure's unreliable and storytelling's seriously flawed.

59

HELL AND BACK

In **TREK TO YOMI**, the dog is more bark than bite

By George Yang

Trek to Yomi copies the style of Akira Kurosawa’s iconic black and white samurai films: rice fields blowing in the wind, villages burning, a great black swirling vortex in hell. OK, so Trek to Yomi goes to some places Kurosawa’s films didn’t. But the path there is littered with glitches, and I only stuck it out through the finicky, floaty combat to see where my samurai’s descent into madness would lead him.

The game’s revenge tale is standard samurai stuff, but the story is well-told. As protagonist Hiroki faces his personal demons (also, literal demons) I got to make decisions that influenced exactly how this samurai tragedy would end. All of the Japanese voice actors give raw performances, and Hiroki’s actor in particular sells his downward spiral into anger and regret.

I like Trek to Yomi’s supernatural elements, too. Hiroki straddles life and death as he journeys through literal hell for the latter half. They add an intriguing mysticism without being overbearing.

Unfortunately combat is weightless and repetitive, and most of this trek is spent repeating the same combos, occasionally parrying enemy attacks to create openings. The long-range weapons like shurikens, and the sword skills I picked up along the way, ended up feeling irrelevant when the same parry and slash routines could kill essentially every normal enemy.

At the same time, I was constantly frustrated by how hard it was to tell when I’d parried an attack. Visual feedback is scant, and I could never consistently capitalise on the opening

I could never consistently capitalise on the opening I’d made

I’d made. Combat feels sloppy elsewhere too: sometimes I could see my slashes clearly connect with an enemy and get no reaction.

The controls and wooden animation just can’t live up to the fluidity of the film

duels Trek to Yomi so badly wants to emulate. After dispatching an enemy I’d hit R to turn around and face the one behind me – and nothing would happen. I’d have to press it multiple times to get Hiroki to register the action. Dodging is inconsistent as well: sometimes I’d be able to roll behind an enemy, while other times it’d be like rolling right into a wall.

HELLBOUND

Exploration mostly follows linear paths from story beat to story beat. At times easy puzzles stood in my way, but solving them was trivial

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 2D side-scrolling game in which you assume the role of a vengeful samurai

EXPECT TO PAY
£16.80

DEVELOPER
Flying Wild Hog

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel(R) Core(TM) i7-5600U CPU @ 2.60GHz, 2.59 GHz

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
trektoyomi.com

because they all used the same design. Outside of combat a fixed camera with 3D movement lets you explore for collectibles and upgrades, such as stamina and health increases. Often, you’ll come across two paths: one that advances the story, and another that leads to some sort of collectible or upgrade. Wanting to find as many upgrades as I could to make Hiroki better in combat, I’d choose one path and stick with it, hoping to find what I was looking for. But if I chose the critical path I’d end up hitting a point of no return before I realised.

Trek to Yomi is very generous with save points before and after nearly every encounter, so restarting from a checkpoint is usually an easy option. But it’s strange and counterintuitive to have to savescum just to explore those alternate paths.

I might have forgiven some of Yomi’s design misdemeanours were it not for the progress-blocking glitches. Sometimes I’d clip through the floor after jumping down from a ledge. Other times my character would vanish into the air after falling through a collapsing roof. I’d have to restart from a checkpoint to try again or close the game and relaunch it. A few times enemy encounters simply wouldn’t activate, and enemies that were supposed to spawn just didn’t – including the final boss. I had to relaunch the game every time I died and wanted to fight it again because otherwise, the arena would be empty.

For all its visual grandeur, Trek to Yomi isn’t much fun. It tries to tell a story worthy of a samurai drama, but the combat feels like the same moves over and over. Forget Kurosawa – these duels never progress beyond the level of a training montage. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A gorgeous game with frustrating combat and glitchy exploration, *Trek to Yomi* is the definition of style over substance.

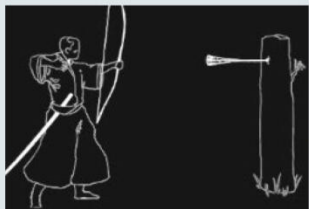
55

LIVE BY THE BLADE? Ranged weapons come in handy



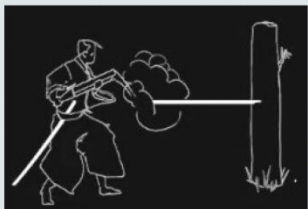
BO-SHURIKEN

Projectiles used to attack enemies from a distance or interrupt their attacks.



BOW AND ARROW

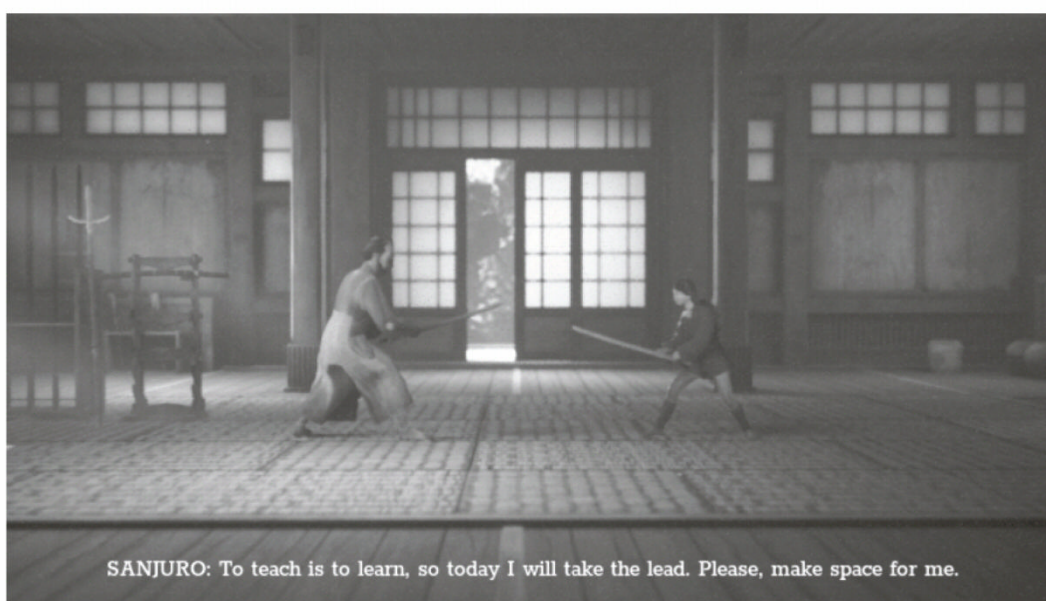
This precise weapon lets you aim at specific body parts of your enemies.



OZUTSU

Very slow to use, but its shots deal high damage and can pierce through enemies.

Hiroki staking out in the rain.



SANJURO: To teach is to learn, so today I will take the lead. Please, make space for me.



FAR LEFT: Young Hiroki sparring with his sensei.

LEFT: Young Hiroki training in the backyard.



The burning fire contrasts nicely with the night sky.

SALT OF THE DEARTH

SALT AND SACRIFICE makes the Souls-like genre feel played out

By Samantha Greer

Salt and Sacrifice is the game that broke the camel's back. I am tired of Souls-likes. To borrow a *Dark Souls* phrase (as shamelessly as these games rifle through the FromSoftware's pockets for lint), I've gone hollow. My interest in seeing variations on these themes is spent. No more do I wish to repeat the same criticisms, to make the same comparisons. These imitators invariably make the same mistakes. Lifting the mechanics wholesale but with none of the underlying fundamentals to make them sing.

It doesn't start without intrigue. You're an inquisitor, banished to the edge of the world to hunt down mages causing destruction wherever they go. The character creator is pretty standard but does let you choose the crime for which you've been banished, even if it's just for kicks. That gave the game some flavour, a bit of tone to set it apart. It vanishes only moments later upon arriving in the game's central hub where characters recite exposition with none of the customary charisma you'd expect of a *Souls* game. It's devoid of the intriguing strangeness, like mention of a Bell of Awakening or a grafting. There is a cool little gateway from which you access each of the game's worlds, by setting runes in the stones like it's a stargate,

with a lot of the games progression is tied to finding new runes. It's a rare novelty in a game almost bereft of them, even if it's simply a spin on

Demon's Souls' archstones.

FromSoftware is great at getting the player to ask questions, giving a slow drip feed of information to fill in the blanks of a loosely sketched world. *Salt and Sacrifice* is too

concrete, too straightforward. Even hints of moral ambiguity like devouring the hearts of the mages you kill don't amount to more than giving the game an edgier tone.

Even the way it says "Obliterated" upon death misunderstands the simplicity of "You Died" as alternately tragic and comical because of how matter of fact it is in the face of brutal demises.

Stamina and status effects and all the usual *Souls* malarkey

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 2D Souls-like action-platformer

EXPECT TO PAY
£13

DEVELOPER
Ska Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 7,
Nvidia GeForce
GTX-970, Intel
i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3GWQLus

"Obliterated" is merely rubbing salt in the wound and it's key to understanding how this Souls-like never penetrates beneath the surface.

There is no one secret to *Dark Souls*, no single special ingredient. It is, to put it mildly, a lot of things done really well at the same time. *Salt and Sacrifice* like most of these imitators and its own predecessor, is only drawn to the difficulty and punishment. *Dark Souls* and its sequels are hard, sure but there's an art to it. As well as a freedom. This game has neither.

NO CONTENDER

The combat is the game's strongest part, and clearly it has been the focus of the creators. Combos and flourishes accompany a sprawling (if largely defunct) skill tree. There's stamina and stunning, status effects, and all the usual *Souls* malarkey. Yet there's a fine line between hefty and clunky when it comes to melee combat in games such as these, and this falls into the latter category more often than not, as does its clumsy platforming. It borrows a lot of the rhythms of *Souls* combat, but they make a lot less sense in two dimensions where your options for dodging and positioning are much more limited. Archers, for instance, can shoot through platforms, meaning that there's really only rolling as a reliable way to evade their arrows, which means far less options for managing groups.

Fighting in *Dark Souls* or *Elden Ring* can feel scrappy, elegant, or anywhere in between, and often does in the course of a single fight. *Salt and Sacrifice* contains no such dynamism. Partly because it neglects one thing that has made *Souls* games the darling of streamers and replays: experimentation.

Maybe you pile on loads of heavy armour to tank your way through a seemingly undodgeable attack, or maybe you use darts to poison a boss so you can kill it slowly but surely.

MIMIC

The sincerest form of flattery

82% DARK SOULS
To the smallest mechanic, it's a blatant copy.



Your quest is to hunt monstrous, dangerous mages.



FAR LEFT: NPC dialogue is dry and lacking in ominous cackling.



BELOW: Chevrons encoded and locked.



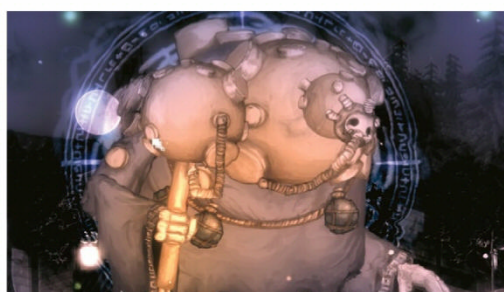


Having played the game I can assure you, there was plenty of salt.



FAR RIGHT: You can pet the elk at least.

BELOW: Co-op is a rare light in an otherwise dull game.



None of that kind of thing really comes up in *Salt and Sacrifice*, with new weapons and tools scarce. Even health potions are a dwindling resource that you need to gather by picking berries and crafting, adding another layer of tedium. There's none of the joy and elation of finding *your* way to overcome a foe. Only the humdrum grind of mastering dodge rolling or getting lucky.

ROLL OVER

Online co-op certainly makes things more enjoyable, even if it does so simply by making most encounters utterly trivial. While I'm grateful for the easy mode option when needed, it sort of betrays the lack of depth in encounters. Even a good co-operator can't carry you all the way through a boss fight, save for an exceptional few, but *Salt and Sacrifice* bosses don't feel at all built to accommodate an extra player. They really can't react properly to another sword in the fight.

Alone, boss fights devolve quickly into a rote, predictable bag of tricks to exploit endlessly for however long it takes to chip away at their absurd health bars. The bland music certainly doesn't help, and switching it off to put on my own tunes was the only way I could get through the long slogs. The mages you hunt are enemies you have to chase after first until you corner them somewhere in the world, but that's more a tiresome preamble to a standard fight than a meaningful shake-up of the formula.

Sure, you can do these hunts endlessly to farm resources to craft

better gear, but if you're like me, you'll be glad to see the back of each one. There are no clever or surprising phase changes to keep you on your toes, only a set of broad, forgettable foes whose names emulate the style of *Souls* villains but with none of the substance. Revelations about important enemies, before or after a fight, are the tantalising bread

crumbs that keep From's games captivating, but there's so little of that to be found in *Salt and Sacrifice*'s numerous brown wastelands.

ELDEN WRONG

Dark Souls and

Bloodborne can be gloomy, but their worlds twist and wind around each other, conveying meaning through geography and enemy placement, through the unexpected connections hidden in the world. No such elegance to be found here. No vistas to spark our imaginations, no strange sights or unexpected horizons. Even Ska Studios' prior games like *Dishwasher Dead Samurai* or *I Made a Game With Zombies in It* revelled in delightful absurdism amidst the angst. This game could really use the spark of joy those titles had.

Even the hub, the heart of the game, is drab and uninspired. A scattering of NPC and upgrade tables strewn about in no particular order. Even hours in I didn't really have a sense of the place's layout, never mind a notion of it as a real, populated home.

You'll be seeing it a lot, too, since levelling up and upgrades aren't tied to the game's checkpoints, called

Obelisks here instead of *Dark Souls*' bonfires, but to little stations spread awkwardly far apart. Worse, despite claims that "progress will be saved", quitting the game will see you start from the game's hub, not your last checkpoint. Meaning you'll have to trek through each world to reach your former destination. It seems so arbitrary and tedious for no reason at all. *Dark Souls* and *Elden Ring* will bring you back to pretty much wherever you leave it and it's only respectful to allow players to step away when they need to.

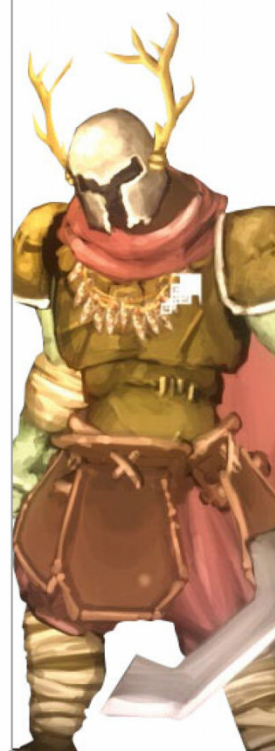
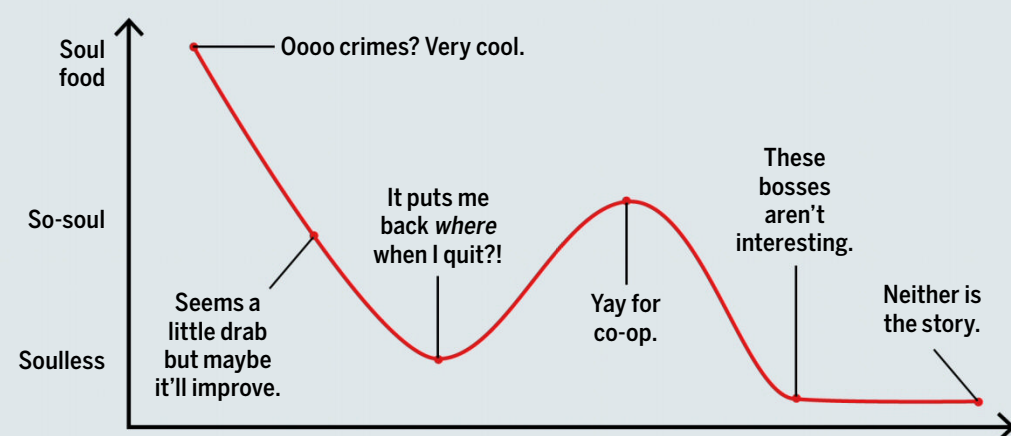
BOREDBORNE

You might be reading this thinking that these comparisons are unfair. That *Salt and Sacrifice* is clearly a smaller game made on a limited budget, it can't possibly compete with a fully fledged AAA studio. I completely agree! So why do these games keep trying? Titles like *Blasphemous* or *Hollow Knight* excel in spite of any comparisons because they hone in on their own particular moods and atmospheres, delivering places that feel unique to them. From that novelty springs forth a multitude of divergences that give those games an identity that serves them well in the absence of the sheer production muscle to compete with the likes of *Dark Souls*. *Salt and Sacrifice* has none of their imagination and none of the AAA muscle to smooth over its rather generic skin.

What we're left with is the epitome of Souls-likes, tired mimics with no tricks of their own, no stories to tell. If you ask me what the unique selling point of this game is, I cannot tell you. The pitch really doesn't extend further than '2D *Dark Souls*' even though the final game is considerably less than that description. When the studio that spawned this genre is still out there, knocking out smash hits, with four of its masterpieces available on PC and its biggest game to date freshly released, there's really no recommendation I can make for *Salt and Sacrifice*. Instead check out Ska Studios' earlier works, which are utterly brimming with the delight that this game sorely lacks. ■

DARK SNORES

A descent into tedium

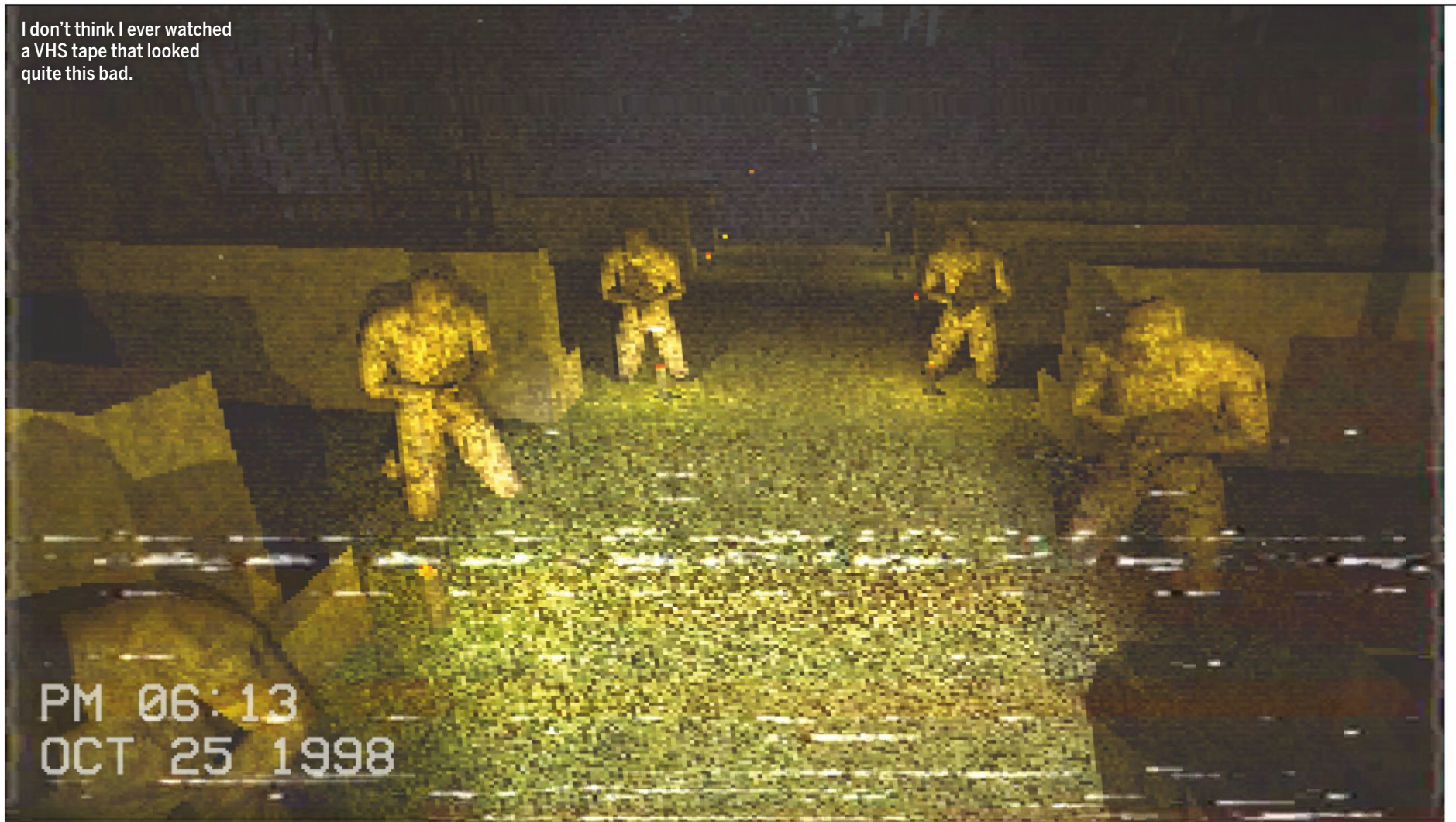


PC GAMER VERDICT

Salt and Sacrifice is ambitious, but faltering in all the ways that matter. A bland, hollow *Dark Souls* imitation.

58

I don't think I ever watched a VHS tape that looked quite this bad.



PM 06:13
OCT 25 1998

BLOODY MARY

Nice place, shame about the statues in **OUR LADY OF SORROW**

There are few pairings as perfect as the early 3D aesthetic and the found footage conceit, which sees games slathered in aggressive filters that warp and flicker the screen, as with knackered VHS tapes. Not only does it smooth over the jagged edges and grainy textures of primitive 3D models, but it takes you right back to 1999 in a concentrated missile of nostalgia, to the year of *The Blair Witch Project* and *Silent Hill*.

With its slow, atmospheric horror and found footage packaging, *Our Lady of Sorrow* is evocative of that momentous year. It's set in an Irish abbey, rather a big and suspiciously empty one, where a witch met an untimely end centuries ago. It's not clear why you're there, or even who you are, but the tape of your exploits is considered so dangerous it has been locked away by the Catholic Church.

Cue lots of wandering round the abbey, while things mysteriously shift around you, including bloody footsteps appearing from nowhere and statues moving while you're not looking. I wouldn't say I was especially frightened by it – I actually enjoyed the game more when I realised that nothing was

going to chase me around. It's more like a spooky National Trust visit, where one of the staff is playing tricks on you as you see the sights.

There's a bit of setup before the spookiness, as you explore the abbey's exterior, reading tourist signs that fill in the backstory. Essentially a witch cursed a priest, who retaliated by burning her at the stake and throwing her remains down the abbey well. The

woman came to be known as An Cailleach, or Our Lady of Sorrow.

STATUESQUE

As the witch was being burnt alive, the image of the Virgin Mary supposedly appeared on her face – and it's how she makes contact

I find nothing remotely frightening about the Virgin Mary

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person horror game set in an abbey in the '90s

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Dan McGrath

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/OurLadySorrow

throughout the game. The abbey must have a job lot of Marys, as they're all over the place, changing position as you make progress. You might be returning to an area after collecting a key – then *bam*, there's another Mary, standing in your way.

Now, it might be that she's not being used effectively here, but I find nothing remotely frightening about the Virgin Mary, no matter how many times her iconic statue is dragged around. That's a problem, given how heavily the game leans on the statue for its set-pieces. Thankfully, there are other statues to pick up the slack.

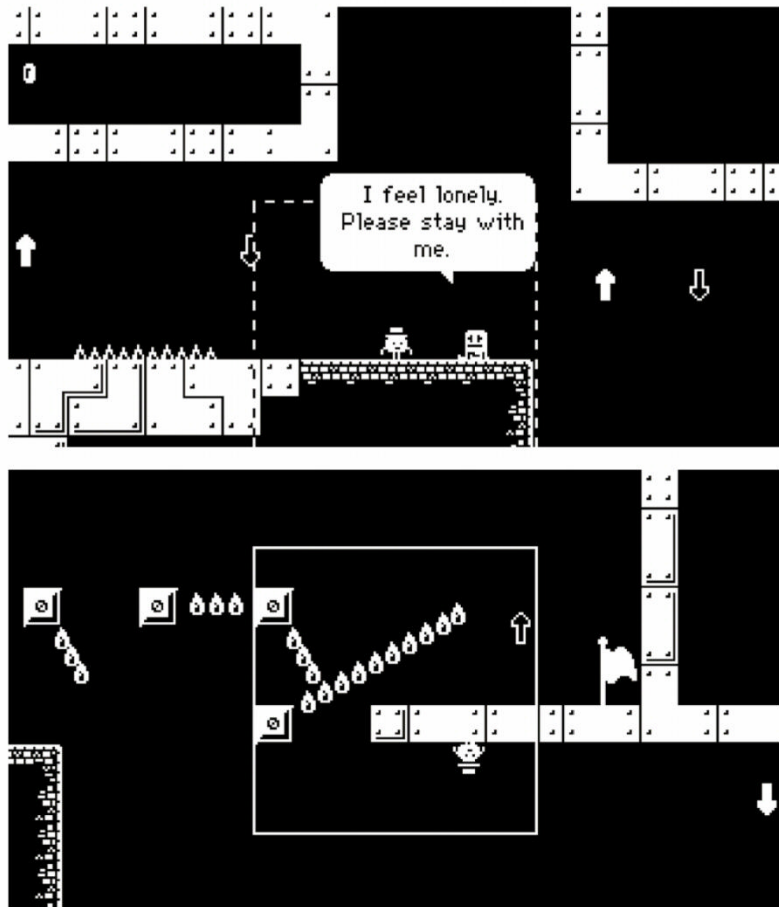
These other statues are far more successful in creating an air of unease. They carry the game, before it reaches its ending. This is an on-point horror game that succeeds in creating a spooky atmosphere. However, it failed to convince me there's anything scary about the mother of Christ. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

There's a rich atmosphere, but no real pay-off to this understated found footage horror game.

58

BELOW: It's a charming world. Shame you see so little of it.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
FeatureKreep

LINK
bit.ly/LooperGame

BOXING CLEVER

Going round and round in puzzler **LOOPER**

If *Looper* doesn't quite make the most of its clever premise, at least it offers a few screens' worth of smart monochrome puzzling. In this browser puzzle-platformer you play as a cute little guy with a very handsome hat – and you've just learned how to fold space for your benefit.

This power takes the form of a big white box that normally follows you around, but that you can freeze in place with a tap of the space bar. This makes the space inside the box loop round on itself, so that if you walk out the left side you'll pop back in on the right. It's a pretty impressive spectacle, more so given that you're in control of the box's position. It feels rewarding to use the looping power to bypass solid walls, jump clear across the screen, or collect optional coins.

Here's an example. If you position the right edge of the box on a too-far platform, and the left by some accessible land, you can reach that distant platform by strolling out the left side of the big white box. Things become even more impressive when gravity flipping is introduced. I was just sinking my molars into an ingenious puzzle game – when that puzzle game staggered to a halt.

Looper, alas, is only 15 minutes long, wrapping up after barely exploring its titular mechanic. There are all the ingredients for a great puzzler here – a clever idea, attractive environments and a few good puzzles – but not the size to let that idea flourish. I can understand why a small jam game might not fulfil its potential, but that's the problem with a good thing – you just want a lot more of it. ■

71

PERFECT BLUE?

Escape a puzzling maze in **OUT OF THE BLUE**

You're not really dungeon crawling unless you're doing it at fixed, 45-degree angles, turning sharply in boxy mazes filled with enemies, traps and puzzles. Created for the *Dungeon Crawler Jam*, *Out of the Blue*'s grid-based movement evokes games like *Dungeon Master*, but with decidedly one-sided combat.

It's one-sided because the enemies will just *stand there* until you shoot them, find another route, or suffer damage by shoving your way straight through. They're obstacles, really, just like everything else in this jungle maze, which you'll slowly best as you spiral outwards from your camp.

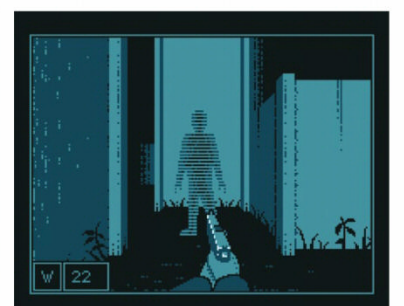
Out of the Blue's most prominent feature is its energy system, which counts down with every step you take. You start each run with just 32 energy, and when that runs out you

wake up back at the camp, ready to take your paltry 32 steps again.

Blessedly, there are ways to increase your roaming range, including opening permanent shortcuts. There are also a few permanent upgrades that make things a whole lot easier. But these items are hard-won, after time spent scouting the environment in patches.

The game is very short, however. I reckon it took me half an hour. Not that it has to be longer, of course, but the world suffers from being condensed to such a compact size. It could be a more intricate and therefore interesting place to explore if it was embiggened by, oh, 50%.

The static enemies also let it down, but I enjoyed the process of exploring and solving *Out of the Blue*, getting further each time I ventured into its dungeon. ■



Direct contact gouges your health, so try to shoot enemies from afar.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Bozó Attila Bertold

LINK
bit.ly/OutBlueGame

72

Scoping stuff out with binoculars will always make me feel like a badass secret agent.



FROND MEMORIES

Try, try, Trigen: the original **FAR CRY** is hilariously difficult

I remember playing *Far Cry* when it first came out. It was the stress test for my first gaming PC: a husky Dell XPS that kept my parents awake at night with its whirring hard drive and glowing tubes. The game was a dense, leafy revelation. At the time, *Far Cry* was so realistic it was like hiding in an actual thicket.

What I don't remember, however, is literally anything else about the game. I don't know how long I played it; how far I got; or whether or not I experienced any enjoyment beyond adoration for its fronds. I certainly forgot about the excruciating animated opening, in which hero Jack Carver – essentially a ballistic dummy in an utterly daft-looking Hawaiian shirt – gets blown up for sailing to the wrong Micronesian island. I literally have no memory of Jack ever speaking, which, in hindsight, is probably for the best, since he sounds like a text-to-speech program trying to seduce a lawnmower. The massive gaps in my memory make me doubt my own sanity. Did I really have a gaming PC? I certainly paid for it.

I develop a new appreciation for *Far Cry* and its mercenary goons

LEAF IT OUT

It all clicks into place when I actually start fighting. I say 'fighting'. I mean 'lying down in the grass, hoping a boat on the other side of the map doesn't explode me with a pinpoint mortar strike'. Even on the easiest mode, *Far Cry* is still like trying to sneak through a monastery while dressed as a one-man band. The only time I feel like I'm getting there is when I'm lying prone under a palm leaf while I urge Carver's Hunter S Thompson-

looking bulk towards an enemy, who will, inevitably, spot me and shoot me before I can draw my machete.

It clicks into place when I steal my first vehicle. At least, it *almost* does. On my first try, my jeep explodes the moment I nestle into the seat. On my second, I manage to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Far Cry 3 but harder. And Vaas is actually Thanos

EXPECT TO PAY
£8.60

DEVELOPER
Crytek Studios

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3xm0eGN

drive it up a hill and wedge it between two trees, like I'm co-starring in a Kevin James remake of *Platoon*. When I finally reach a road, however, I develop a new appreciation for *Far Cry* and its mercenary goons, who all deserve to be gunned down or splattered in the most humiliating way possible. It's fun until my jeep is inevitably blown up by a gunboat

MAN BEASTS

There's one final door in my *Far Cry* mind palace that has remained sealed; one memory that has evaded me. Partway into the game, the jungle warfare gives way to an Island of Dr Moreau misstep. One thing I will say about the Trigen enemies, though: they're so badly balanced they make me fondly recall the distant past of two hours ago, when I was cowering in a bush and hurling swear words at an enemy dinghy. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Beautiful, merciless and occasionally horrible. Like eating an exotic fruit and then learning it's a giant spider egg.

69

BELOW: No, I'm not trying to seduce the dodo. Even if it looks like it.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£6.70

DEVELOPER
Reflections (Ubisoft)

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

BUDDING EXPERT

Something about **GROW HOME** feels slightly seedy

Plants are capricious bastards, aren't they? When they're not dying because they've had too little water, they're rotting because they've had too much. The only upside, apart from pretty flowers, is that I'm glad when it rains now, because it's one less thankless task to do for my ungrateful leafy children.

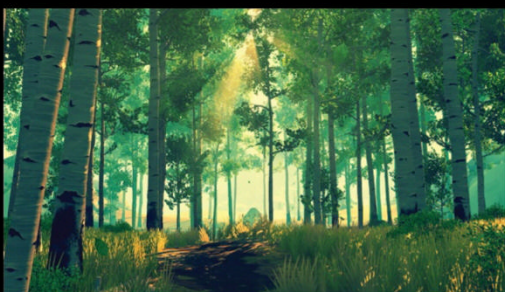
If only it was more like *Grow Home*. That way I could palm off the entire wretched process to the likes of BUD. He's a cheerful, spaghetti-limbed red robot who exists only to help the game's giant alien plants burst into life. This involves clambering up the giant stalks and riding long, leafy appendages through the skies. You can float down gently by using flowers as parachutes and use bouncy leaves to propel yourself upwards. And I realise, writing that, that it

sounds like the most wholesome game ever made. The sort of experience you could share with your children to foster an early love of games. But there's a problem.

Everything in *Grow Home* looks like a dick. You climb a giant central dick, then clamber out onto another, smaller side-dick. Then you have to straddle the side-dick, like a robot cowboy at the bellend rodeo. By the end it looks like you've made the sort of balloon animal that has ended careers in children's entertainment. It's not just my imagination. Honestly.

Luckily, *Grow Home* is lovely. The climbing is sticky and tactile, and there's a pleasant weightlessness to everything. The central loop of climb, fall, ride sky penis, climb again is compelling enough to keep me playing, however weird it sometimes feels. ■

73



FIREWATCH

I planned on continuing the leafy theme with *The Forest*, but being a massive coward, decided it was probably too stressful. "Instead," I foolishly thought, "I'll play that nice game about the sad man with the fat hands." It turns out that trying to survive the night in a forest is less gruelling than *Firewatch's* emotional cheese-grater. Apparently, a game that has fully-fleshed out characters experiencing relatable things is harder on the soul than avoiding mutants. It's at its best when you're experiencing the small moments, and the underpinning friendship between Henry and Delilah is as beautiful as the stirring scenery. The sort of game that makes you miss walkie-talkies. ■

87



EASTSHADE

I love *Eastshade's* dedication to creativity. If I got shipwrecked on an island full of anthropomorphised animals the last thing I'd think about would be finding fresh canvas. Nope. I'd be smashing up my easel and fashioning it into a rudimentary spear, ready for fire and slaughter. Try me, owl-person. I'll blind you with weaponised alizarin crimson. This is why I probably don't deserve a game like *Eastshade*. It's brave enough to put all its stock in painting pictures, which feels refreshing like a coastal breeze. The worst that can happen is that you run out of materials, fail at composition, or accidentally shiv a deer with a sharpened paintbrush. I made the last one up. ■

72



PROTEUS

If landscape-loving British writer Robert Macfarlane made a game it would be *Proteus*. There's no death. No enemies. You can't even jump. All you can do is wander around its landscape and ponder what it all means. It's the perfect game to play if you've ever felt a sense of self-loathing for not fully appreciating the craft of level design.

You only get out of *Proteus* what you put in, and it's largely bereft of any explicit hidden meaning, but it's still a soothing, peculiar distraction. ■

68

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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



94

GROUP TEST

The six best new gaming laptops money can buy, reviewed.

98

TECH REPORT

Why isn't OLED the standard for gaming monitors?

100

TECH TALES

The true cost of running *Crysis* on your PC back in 2007.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Find the right build for you with our expert parts list.

GROUP TEST

GAMING LAPTOPS

We put the newest gaming laptops through their paces, pushing Nvidia, Intel, and AMD's latest chips to the limit. *By Jacob Ridley*

Every year, the best gaming laptops get a whole lot better. The latest laptops are more portable than ever, yet somehow don't sacrifice any gaming performance in order to slim down. It's really rather impressive, and even the thinnest designs sport all the fancy features that high-end gaming PCs do. We're talking multicore CPUs, high-end GPUs, and speedy NVMe SSDs. You can even find heaps of RAM and super-high refresh screens under the hood.

In 2022, the latest notebooks come sporting new Intel 12th Gen or AMD Ryzen 6000-series processors. And these are gradually replacing previous generation models today. There are also new Nvidia RTX 30-series GPUs – the improved RTX 3070 Ti and RTX 3080 Ti – that show there's still more performance to be wrought from the familiar laptop chassis of yesteryear.



2



Stealth GS66

MSI **£3,100**

More F-117 Nighthawk than ninja

1 You might be surprised by the silicon within the MSI Stealth GS66's slender chassis. It's the same slimline chassis MSI has been using for its GS66 machines for generations, but the performance is very different thanks to the core components picked for this 12th Gen build. There's Intel's finest 20-thread CPU, the Core i9 12900H, alongside the new and improved mobile RTX 3070 Ti.

So far, so good. Where I'm struggling is in the way that MSI has slapped a 4K screen to it, running at a measly 60Hz. Maybe I'm being a bit of an entitled Timmy about this, but no gaming

laptop in 2022 should be saddled with a 60Hz refresh screen. The noise is also a little unbearable – this laptop is incredibly loud and there's no way you could game on it in polite company.

Similarly, I'm not fussed on the price. When Nvidia announced the RTX 3070 Ti we were promised \$1,500 laptops, of which I've seen precisely zero. At twice that price, this MSI Stealth GS66 doesn't do enough to justify its cost.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- CPU is a computational beast
- Makes a lot of noise
- 4K 60Hz has no place in a laptop

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I9 12900H / MEMORY: 32GB DDR5-4800 / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 3070 TI / DISPLAY: 15.6-INCH / NATIVE RES: 3840 X 2160 / REFRESH RATE: 60 HZ / STORAGE: 2TB PCIE 4.0 SSD

ROG Strix Scar 17

ASUS **£2,600**

Raw power in an uninspired shell

2 It's clear Asus is not messing around when it comes to the 2022 evolution of its high-end ROG gaming laptops. With the Strix Scar 17's G733Z configuration as my first taste – touting its masterful combination of Nvidia's new, more-powerful RTX 3070 Ti, and Intel's Core i9 12900H – that became very clear.

With a 12th Gen chip on its side, and a higher wattage GPU than many, there's hardly an iota of competition for the price. But does the rest of the laptop stand up next to that immense configuration? I'd say yes, with a few small gripes.

It's a gorgeous machine, but the chassis' finish collects grease marks super easily. Sadly, the cooling system doesn't translate into as fantastic temperatures as I'd have liked, either. This laptop, though, is surprisingly quiet. Sure, it's not as stylish or as apt with ray tracing as the Blade 17, but there's a good \$1,000 price difference there. And for something that can outpace the laptops of yesteryear in almost every running, I'd pay that price for sure.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- RTX 3070 Ti performs above average
- 12th Gen Intel CPU is immense
- More DDR5 RAM than you need

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I9 12900H / MEMORY: 32GB DDR5-4800 / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 3070 TI / DISPLAY: 17.3-INCH / NATIVE RES: 2560 X 1440 / REFRESH RATE: 240 HZ / STORAGE: 2TB PCIE 4.0 SSD

GROUP TEST



3

Blade 17

RAZER **£4,300**

A potent laptop brew

3 This is it, a glimpse at the higher echelons of gaming laptops in 2022. With this new version of the Razer Blade 17, you're looking at the Intel Core i7 12800H alongside the GeForce RTX 3080 Ti. High-end hardware that can go toe-to-toe with most desktop rigs.

This being a Razer laptop, it not only looks gorgeous but boasts a beautiful screen and a well-rounded spec too. It'll cost you a pretty penny of course, but high-end laptops are rarely affordable. Still, with a list price of £4,299, this is expensive even at these rarified heights. Is it worth the money? Do the

improvements from Nvidia and Intel warrant that kind of price tag? Mostly.

This laptop sets the bar pretty high. At least it does when it's plugged in. If you want something with a bit more stamina, then there are much better options around – the Razer Blade Advanced for one offers double the battery life that you'll get from this, although you won't get the same kind of performance.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Stunning CPU and GPU performance
- Vibrant, high-refresh screen
- Excellent build quality

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7 12800H / **MEMORY**: 32GB DDR5-4800 / **GPU**: NVIDIA RTX 3080 TI / **DISPLAY**: 17.3-INCH / **NATIVE RES**: 2560 X 1440 / **REFRESH RATE**: 240 HZ / **STORAGE**: 1TB PCIE 4.0 SSD

ROG Zephyrus G14

ASUS **£2,000**

AMD in total control

4 The new Asus ROG Zephyrus G14 is a stunner, with a new screen, webcam and improved chassis. The addition of AMD's latest Ryzen 6000 processor and Radeon RX 6800S GPU only sweetens the deal for this slick and well-liked gaming laptop. Though it's not entirely a machine without faults: the battery life and price tag are a bit of a let-down.

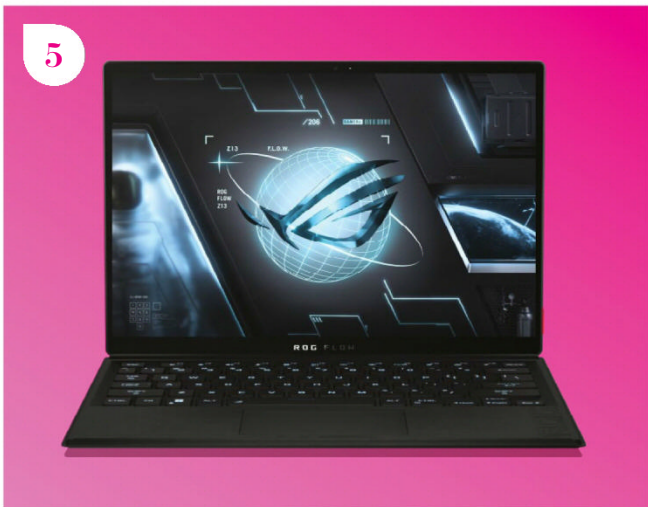
I've had a good look at all the Zephyrus models these past few years and I've come away impressed on every occasion. It's the laptop I recommend when a friend asks for a mid to high-end gaming machine: something that

they can game on, work on, and coming in cheaper than a Razer Blade. In all but one of those aspects, the new model is still one of the best all-round packages money can buy. I'd fall short of recommending the exact model I received for review, however, because it isn't that much cheaper than a new Razer Blade 14. And don't get me wrong, there's a lot of silicon under the hood of the Zephyrus G14, but it's tougher to justify the price.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Fantastic gaming performance
- Sturdy and stylish chassis
- 16:10, 2560 x 1440, 120Hz IPS panel

SPECS CPU: AMD RYZEN 9 6900HS / **MEMORY**: 32GB DDR5-4800 / **GPU**: AMD RADEON RX 6800 / **DISPLAY**: 14-INCH / **NATIVE RES**: 2560 X 1600 / **REFRESH RATE**: 120 HZ / **STORAGE**: 1TB PCIE 4.0 SSD



A LAPTOP'S UPGRADE PATH

One of the best things about PC gaming is the flexibility to upgrade and swap out components as you please. But with gaming laptops it's not so simple. You can't just rip a GPU or CPU out and put in a new one – they're almost always soldered onto the mainboard. So what is a gaming laptop owner to do?

One option is to upgrade or swap out your SSD and RAM. A handful of gaming laptops actually come with a spare NVMe SSD slot just under the hood, making for an easy upgrade. But even for the ones that don't, you can switch out a smaller drive for a larger capacity one. The other upgrade is RAM, which will likely require a complete replacement of what's currently in there. A bump to 32GB, or even 64GB, can make a big difference if you're running any RAM-intensive apps on your machine regularly.

ROG Flow Z13

ASUS **£1,900**

A gaming... tablet?

5 The Asus ROG Flow Z13 is a tribute to Asus' manufacturing and design. It's a wonderful thing to behold and an impressive chunk of hardware. It isn't for everyone though. To be honest, there's a good chance it isn't for anyone, but there's something very appealing about what Asus is trying to do here.

Asus has managed to squeeze a surprisingly powerful CPU into this 12mm thick chassis, in the form of an Intel Core i9. The base clock ticks along at 2.5GHz, with the potential to boost up to 5GHz. While I never expected to hit 5GHz in such a thin chassis, I've

found it actually does manage to do exactly that. The RTX 3050 Ti in the Flow Z13 is just about capable of gaming on the go. It's not a powerhouse, and you are going to have to knock down settings wherever possible, but you can game on it. And that's nothing to be sniffed at.

If nothing else, Asus should be applauded for thinking outside the gaming laptop box and giving us a genuine PC gaming tablet.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Compact and versatile design
- Strong CPU performance
- Underpowered GPU

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I9 12900H / MEMORY: 16GB LPDDR5-5200 / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 3050 Ti / DISPLAY: 13.4-INCH / NATIVE RES: 1920 X 1200 / REFRESH RATE: 120 HZ / STORAGE: 1TB PCIE 4.0 SSD

Legion 5 Pro

LENOVO **£1,800**

Impressive but costly

6 The Lenovo Legion 5 Pro is everything a PC gamer could want in a modern gaming laptop: an Intel Core i7 12700H, 16GB of DDR5 4800MHz (effective) memory, a 1TB SSD, 16-inch 1600p IPS panel, and support for Nvidia G-Sync alongside a 165Hz refresh rate. So the Legion's problem certainly isn't a hardware one.

The Legion 5 does perform decently well at 1080p, which is how we've largely tested it for the sake of comparative benchmarks with other laptop models. However, you are actually looking at a much more detailed, and

demanding, 1600p screen on this particular model. The RTX 3060 does struggle a little more at this laptop's native resolution.

The Legion 5 Pro isn't the slimmest laptop around, nor the prettiest. Though it is well-built despite its size. The fact it's not quite readily available in the US is another drawback, however, and even when it's more readily available in the UK it's not cheap enough to recommend it over last-gen models.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Stunning IPS screen
- 16:10 aspect ratio
- Great I/O

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7 12700H / MEMORY: 16GB DDR5-4800 / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 3060 / DISPLAY: 16-INCH / NATIVE RES: 2560 X 1600 / REFRESH RATE: 165 HZ / STORAGE: 1TB PCIE 4.0 SSD

Alienware's curved 34-inch OLED panel is one of a few viable options.

DARK MATTER

OLED is the TV standard now – so why not in monitors?

Organic light-emitting diodes have been all the rage in your front room for years now. While traditional LED or LCD TV panels struggled to achieve natural blacks and realistic colours, OLED tellies can render true black on one pixel, and vibrant colour on an adjacent one. It's light years ahead of the older tech, a massive visual step forward akin to the advent of HD.

It's also a perfect screen technology for PC gaming in many ways. Most OLED TV panels refresh at 120Hz, and if you've played consecutive rounds of an online shooter at 60Hz and then 120Hz, you know the difference that that can make. The colour reproduction is ideal for games, and the incredibly thin panel size would be a real space saver on your desk. These are all fine properties for an OLED PC monitor. You may have noticed, however, that you don't currently have one. And that, in fact, basically nobody does yet.

The mystery of OLED's slow adoption to PC is one thing we can't simply put down to the pandemic or the semiconductor shortage – the problems run deeper than that. Although it seems like a no-brainer to us as enthusiast-grade consumers to drape our desks with the latest panel tech finery, there's actually a tangled knot of issues holding OLED back from invading the Newegg and Scan monitor listings and helping us up our K/D/A ratios.

Firstly, although it might have seemed to us as though it blew up and changed the TV market very quickly, that's probably only because we weren't paying much attention to it back in 2004. It was then, before most of us had even made the jump to HD, that Sony released the first OLED TV model, and the other big players in the TV market followed suit in the following months and years. These 11-inch screens cost an average of \$2,500 – and that's in 2004 money. Nobody's scratching their heads as to why OLED didn't take the world by storm right away. For a long time, it was simply too expensive to be of interest to the average consumer.

STARK CONTRAST

It took more than a decade of research and investment to make OLED tellies commercially viable, and along the way both Sony and Panasonic actually shut down their respective OLED divisions, declaring that it'd never catch on. And then, of course, it suddenly did. The tipping point was probably around 2017, when LG's commitment to the cause started paying off and we all ran out to buy its lovely panels. So, you could say OLED wasn't exactly an overnight success.

And with that in mind, the fact that there are already at least some OLED PC monitors available seems timely by comparison – at least we probably won't have to wait as long as telly enthusiasts did. Dell's Alienware division got ahead of the curve with OLED panel production some years ago, and



What's next?

While we await the drip-down of one TV tech to monitors, the TV world's already looking for the next big thing to follow it. MicroLED is another self-emissive technology like OLED which promises four to five times the brightness and better colours. It's years away from mass production, though.



FAR LEFT: Scenic, but not the ideal setting for a Vermintide session.



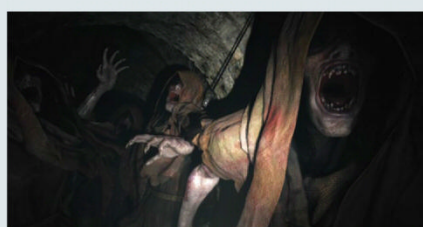
LEFT: This 11-inch beaut would have set you back \$2,500 in '07. Progress is slow.

GOGGLE BOX *Four advantages OLED offers gamers*



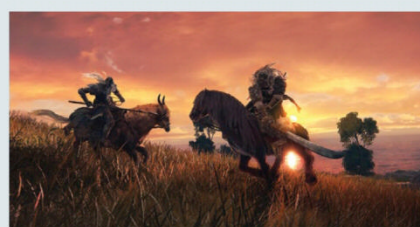
HIGH REFRESH RATES

120Hz is the standard for TVs using the tech, and Alienware's wrung 175Hz from its panels. It's a big upgrade over 60Hz.



TRUE BLACKS

When a diode displays black on an OLED screen, it's in an 'off' state. True inky black – perfect for horror games.



INCREDIBLE COLOUR

As you may have noticed, *Elden Ring* doesn't look like Good Morning Britain. It deserves OLED more.



SUPER-THIN PANELS

All the more room to clutter up your desk with RGB light pads and mixers. And coffee mugs...

were the first to bring an OLED gaming monitor to market way back in 2017. It's still the market leader today – while most rival offerings are essentially just televisions with a bit of gaming branding slapped on, wildly too big and impractical for a typical desktop setting, the Alienware AW3423DW is a useable 34-inch screen size. It's curved, 3840x1440, and has a 175Hz refresh rate. It's the sweet spot right now, and it's selling for around £1,100 in the UK. But the problem is, there's a months-long waiting list before you can get one, thanks to sharply limited supply.

But it's not just stock availability problems holding OLED back from PC gaming. Even if there are models available that do the job, the technology comes with some pretty significant unresolved issues that should make you think twice before investing in an OLED monitor of your own.

The first is burn-in. As any AV forums veteran will tell you, when an individual OLED has to emit one particular colour and brightness for extended periods of time, it's susceptible to fatigue. When a whole OLED screen retains one static image for prolonged periods, you start to see ghosting, or image burn-in, where previous images are still faintly visible after the screen moves on to a new image.

In TVs and smartphones this isn't so much of an issue. It's rare for your TV to display the same thing for hours, and just in case you leave the Netflix menu on all night while you fall asleep, most smart TVs have pretty aggressive screensavers that kick in before any damage can be done. The same goes for smartphones, which tend to lock their screens and power down pretty quickly when not in use.

BURN AFTER READING

But on a PC, not only do you have persistent elements like the Windows taskbar visible for long periods while you're working away on your desktop, you've also got in-game elements like HUD features which may not require any state changes from individual OLEDs even while the rest of the screen is alive with activity. PCs have screensavers too, of course, but they can't save OLED panels from these tricky scenarios – especially if you enjoy marathon gaming sessions.

Which leads to OLED's final hurdle: the chicken-egg conundrum of market adoption. Virtual reality faces the same challenge – prices are high right now because the total user base is still pretty low. That means manufacturers can't pass on production cost savings to customers yet, because manufacturing things in small numbers is more expensive. Brands like Alienware, Asus, Acer, and LG need people to buy OLED monitors in their droves in order to

produce a higher number of units at a cheaper individual cost. And people won't do that right now, because the unit cost is expensive. We're in a standoff.

OLED isn't like 3DTV. We don't really need any convincing – one look at those lovely inky blacks on a TV, and those vivid colours, and we immediately want our games to look like that too. So it'll happen, one day – IPS will become a legacy tech and we'll all enjoy individually lit pixels. But we don't throw monitors out every couple of years like graphics cards. The churn is much slower, and when we look to the world of TVs we can see we're arguably even ahead of schedule for mainstream adoption.

Phil Iwaniuk

**PRICES ARE HIGH
RIGHT NOW BECAUSE
THE TOTAL USER BASE
IS STILL PRETTY LOW**

PROPHET MARGIN

The real cost of running **CRYSIS** in 2007, upgrade by upgrade

A futuristic chopper passing over the Lingshan Islands by moonlight. Gruff men in nanosuits prepare to drop into the combat zone below. After quoting half of Predator at each other, they jump. You jump with them. You reach the sands after a speedier descent than planned, turn your flashlight on, and press W. Then – then I don't know. Nobody does.

At least, nobody did in 2007 when *Crysis* first came out, because this moment in the opening level was about as far as we could stand to endure at 7fps. The entire rest of Crytek's innovative sandbox shooter was a complete mystery. We'd been told to expect high system requirements and a rough ride for our GPUs but truthfully, we didn't really believe that running *Crysis* on even the lowest settings would be such a struggle. Or that attempting to do so on max settings would be impossible. All the stern talk about its technical demands was probably just cautionary bluster, many of us thought, intended for students who thought they could run it on their Lenovo Thinkpads during lectures. And then we ran to the shops, bought a boxed copy on release day, ran home again, entered our CD keys in the install menu like overgrown, far less cute children on Christmas morn, whacked the graphics up to max, and cried into our hands at the slide show on our monitors.

OVERCLOCKED, OVERDRAWN

This was certainly my experience, and the solution was obvious: I needed a better PC. This was the platform's next seminal title, a seismic moment like *Doom* or *Half-Life*, and I would not be witnessing it on medium settings or at sub-30fps. That would be like getting married in a Burton suit or watching the World Cup final in 144p. Like a great many

gamers in 2007, I was not a man of means. Having just graduated university, I'd taken the cunning decision to work my way back down through the education tiers and enrolled at the local college. Three night shifts per week at the nearby Sainsbury's, stacking shelves on the meat aisle, accounted for 100% of my total income. So I did what anybody would do: I upgraded my RAM and hoped for the best.

It's been a truism since the neolithic era that RAM offers the best bang to buck ratio of all potential upgrades, and that was perhaps truer in the noughties than it's ever been.

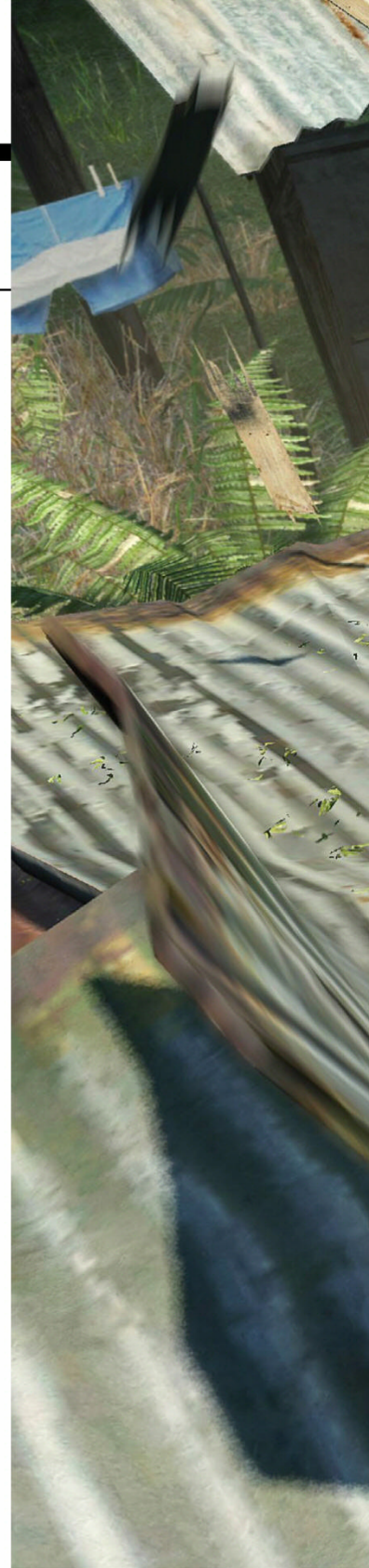
DDR2 was making its way into systems, and a 2x1GB kit of it would set you back a mere £60 with decent speeds – one mere night shift's worth of toil for this upgrader. I went from 2GB to 4GB, clicking the new modules in place and fully expecting a playable *Crysis* was waiting for me when I got the case panel back on.

There was a noticeable improvement in performance, and in retrospect, knowing that the very best PCs of the late 2010s still struggled to hold *Crysis* to a firm 60fps in some areas, it's remarkable that this upgrade was even perceptible. But I'd saved up for that RAM and I wanted more than a few extra token frames here and there. The graphics card would have to go next. The GeForce 8800 GTX that sang like a bird when you loaded *Team Fortress 2* or *World in Conflict* was no longer fit for purpose.

CARD DECLINED

It wasn't until the following summer of 2008 that I found the £400 for a GTX 280, Nvidia's next generation of DirectX 10 card. It cost the majority of my pay packet. I'd squirrelled a bit a way, month by month, and finally the new silicon was inside my PC. By that point I'd tried every combination of graphics options in *Crysis*'s menus, trying to strike a magical balance of performance saving and gorgeousness that couldn't be

THE SOLUTION WAS OBVIOUS: I NEEDED A BETTER PC



PHIL IWANIUK

In a mere 71 months, Phil Iwaniuk will have cleared all his payments on that GTX 280. If you bought fresh meat from the big Sainsbury's in Bath circa 2007, you have him to thank.

FUTURE PROOFING *Four effects in Crysis that even modern PCs struggle with*



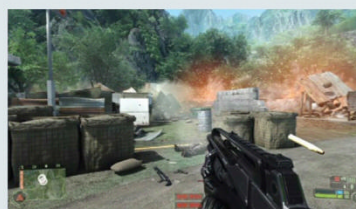
HIGH SAMPLE MOTION BLURRING

Motion blur itself's pretty ubiquitous by now, but what sets *Crysis* apart from its progeny is how good it looks when you take a screenshot of it. It takes a silly number of samples to smooth out that motion blur.



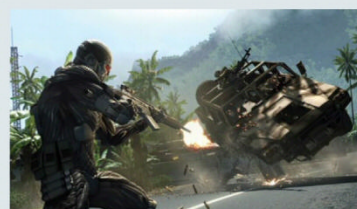
SELF-SHADOWING PARALLAX OCCLUSION MAPPING

A highfalutin' way of saying 'the bumps on the floor cast shadows from more than one light source'. An extremely resource-hungry way of conveying depth of texture. Rarely used now.



ALL THE DESTRUCTIBLE OBJECTS

Every scene is filled with large and small objects you can shoot to oblivion, deform, pick up, or blow up. It's not the mere presence of them, but the volume – modern titles wouldn't dream of trying to match it.



USING ONE CORE FOR AI

At the time of development, Crytek made its prediction of where it thought CPU technology was heading. It banked on processor clockspeed rising dramatically in the future. It was wrong. As a result, tasks aren't spread over cores efficiently.



found. I'd overclocked my Core 2 Quad Q6600 for all its worth, and squeezed the last drop out of my RAM speeds. There was nowhere else to look. This GPU had to do it.

It was probably cognitive dissonance that led me to become satisfied with the result. A combination of knowing that running *Crysis* in the mid-20s on high settings was not worth the upgrades I'd just spent, and the knowledge that I'd never spend another penny in the name of this accursed game. On balance, I just accepted the outcome and finally, a year after release, began to play beyond *Crysis'* opening five minutes.

This was, of course, one of PC gaming's great unifying experiences, our Woodstock. Dylan going electric, except it was the consumer, not the artist, being sold out. CryEngine's lighting, rendering, and postprocessing techniques continued to confound hardware for a further decade, and in the end, was it even that good once you got off the beach and started fighting aliens? Irrelevant: the real game was trying to run the game, and that's now deep in our culture. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: High destruction scenes were what really tanked the framerate.

BELOW: PC Gamer's monster recommended rig from 2007. Couldn't run it.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£952

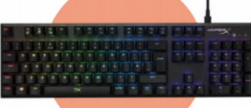
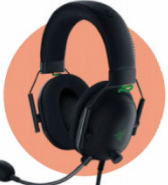
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400F Intel £170 There's no iGPU on this chip but it's a little cheaper as a result, and will work great for this particular build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3050 Nvidia £239 This GPU will deliver 1080p performance easily, and with 8GB of memory it's built to last.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £0 There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-2400 Corsair £39 You could bump this to 16GB, but to save as much as possible we'll stick to 8GB.
POWER SUPPLY		CV Series 550W Corsair £39 You could likely make do with less wattage, but Nvidia recommends a 550W PSU for the RTX 3050, so let's be safe.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,528

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400 Intel £170 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £30 Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		A80 1TB Silicon Power £98 Silicon Power has delivered a high capacity, affordable SSD and has comes with some serious storage speed.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

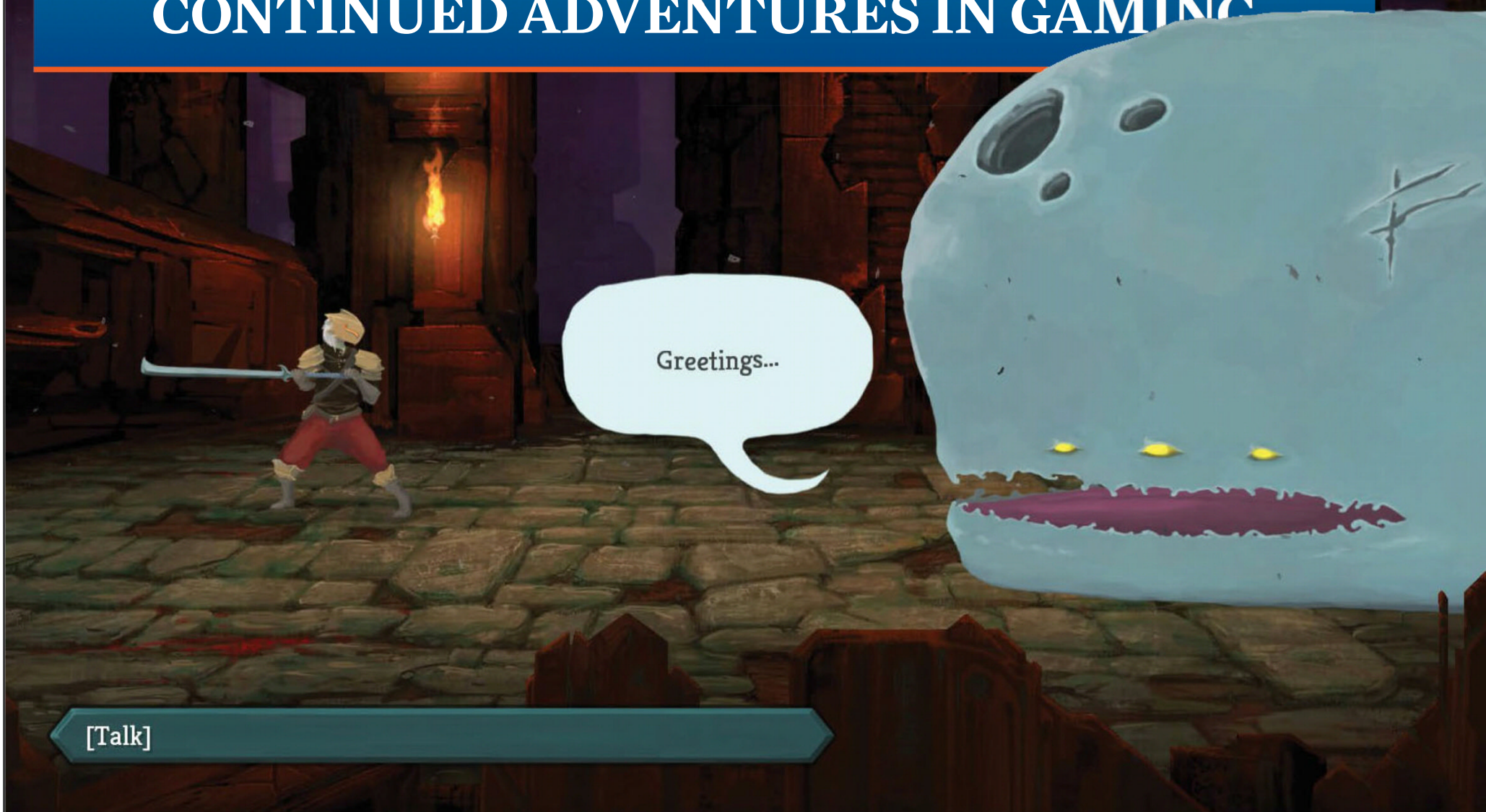


TOTAL
£4,632

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi MSI £410 This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 12900K Intel £599 Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB G.Skill £421 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £120 Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“As I landed the final blow, my community went wild”

It's a pleasure to finally play game-changing roguelike deckbuilder **SLAY THE SPIRE**

It's hard to say something about *Slay the Spire* that hasn't already been said. It's widely considered as one of the best single-player card games out there. But playing it after everyone knows its prestige has been a unique pleasure.

For anyone unfamiliar, it's a roguelike deck-building adventure where you battle up a spire that, er, you need to slay. Simple enough. You take the role of one of four heroes, each with their own starting decks, abilities, and cards available to them as they progress along their quest to destroy the tower and all the horrible monsters that live in it.

You start with some basic cards and set off on your path, through enemies, random events, and bosses, struggling to survive. The original

▶ IMOGEN MELLOR



THIS MONTH
Counted damage numbers on her fingers.

ALSO PLAYED
Valorant, Overwatch 2

hand you were dealt will become dead weight as you pile on better options. NPCs along the way can offer buffs and other rewards that can improve your odds. But ultimately it's your choices and your tactical know-how that will decide whether you succeed.

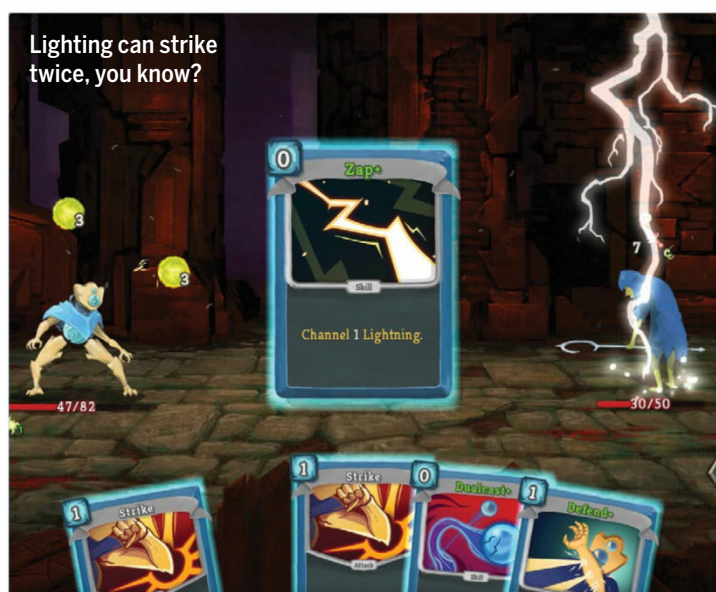
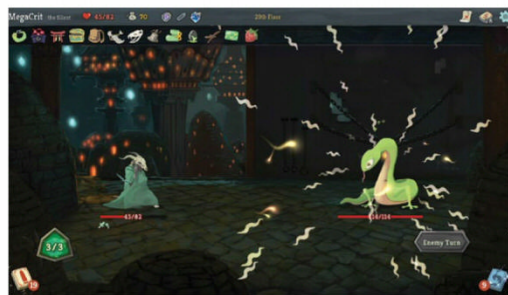
The actual storytelling is minimal. You're sent by the whale-like god (?) Neow on your mission to slay the spire. Each playable character is resurrected over and over until the deed is done, but it's never revealed why they are bound to the task. But

TOP: Neow-thing to see here, just a massive whale alien.

none of that is really important when you're busy being crushed by ghouls, bird-people, thieves, and worse.

I've been playing *Slay the Spire* on stream, which comes with its own fun. I've not yet slayed my spire, but I've gotten pretty far, usually falling at the third boss. Streaming it gives the game a new flair. Rather than facing a new enemy with little information, I instead have a running track of people telling me how tough it is. There are 'oohs' and 'aahs' when I find an unlikely lethal combination, and commiserations when my characters fall to their knees in defeat once again.

I'VE BEEN PLAYING SLAY THE SPIRE ON STREAM, WHICH COMES WITH ITS OWN FUN

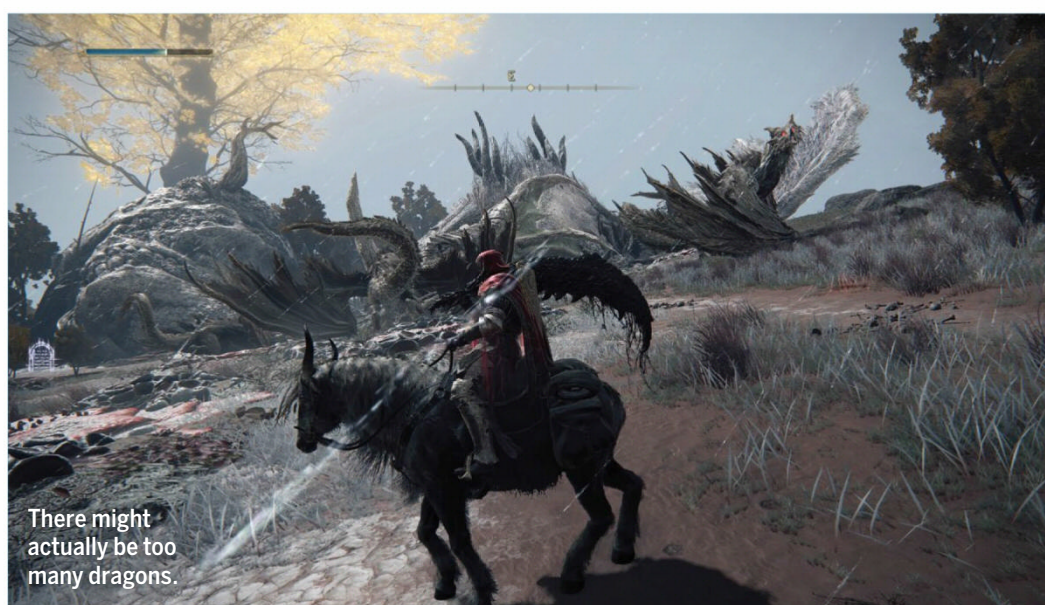


DECKED OUT

One viewer, seriously invested in the game and my run, once warned that they didn't think I was going to beat a boss. It was too hard, my deck wasn't refined enough, encumbered by too many unwieldy cards. But I beat it. I mulled over every move and I muttered numbers and multipliers to myself searching for the optimal play. As I landed the final blow, my community went wild, complimenting my process and my moves. And that one avid *Spire* player confessed they thought they couldn't have won that battle themselves.

Slay the Spire may be a single-player game, but there is a beauty to being dealt your hand with an audience. Knowing your odds, good and bad, with people right there looking over your shoulder at your moves. It's like a virtual casino where everyone is on your side, and instead of gambling with money, you're gambling with your hero's life.

I can see why *Slay the Spire* inspired a boom in roguelike deck builders. With hundreds of cards and randomised maps and events, it's endlessly replayable – I'll be coming back to it for years yet. In fact, I'm already plotting how I'm going to get to the final boss on my next run... ■



“A spirit mostly lost in modern D&D”

Old-fashioned dungeoneering in **ELDEN RING**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Spent a lot of time with a lantern on his belt.

ALSO PLAYED
Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga, *Death's Door*

I Recently in my tabletop gaming, I've been exploring something called the 'OSR', a movement to recapture in modern role-playing the very specific feel of the earliest days of *Dungeons & Dragons*. What have I learned? Well, one thing at least: *Elden Ring* is 70s-era D&D.

It's hardly novel to suggest FromSoft has been influenced by the world's most popular RPG, but I'm not just talking about classes and levels and stats. It isn't really rules that define D&D's first incarnations, it's a distinct philosophy of play – one that *Elden Ring* seems to directly invoke.

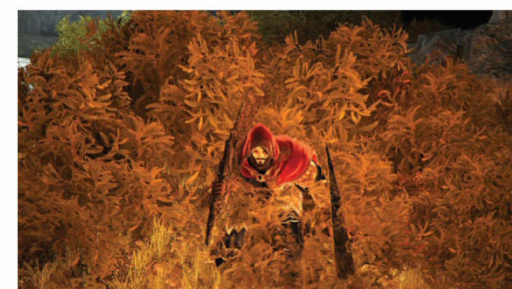
THACO NIGHT

In the world of D&D 1st edition, dungeons aren't playgrounds for adventurers, they're scary and hostile. Character deaths are common thanks to unforgiving traps and monsters, and you can't always expect a fair challenge. You may well encounter beasts far higher in level than you, and need to either run away or find some clever way to exploit their behaviours and weaknesses. All very familiar, right?

Elden Ring has a deliberately sparse structure, forgoing a linear path and story in favour of an open sandbox dotted with dungeons, each given only enough justification to keep you exploring. It directly evokes 'hexcrawl' campaigns, where tabletop players move across a hex map of locations and random encounters. And it's a sandbox that isn't bound by the conventions of fantasy. Both Miyazaki and Gygax are equally prone to dropping overt horror and even sci-fi elements into their worlds for the players' heroes to discover.

In both, money and experience points are inextricably linked; resource management is as important as combat tactics; treasure is unique and often strange; and there's nothing cooler than killing a dragon.

I've lamented before the disproportionate influence of older tabletop games on videogames, and how it does a disservice to the diversity of the modern hobby. But in this case there's something charming about seeing a spirit mostly lost in modern D&D living on so strongly in 2022's most acclaimed game. Call me retro, but I reckon there's nothing better than a deep, dark dungeon that absolutely hates you. ■



“Our bodies were robots and our weapons were dunks”

Flailing and balling in **CRYPTIC SEA'S BASKETBALL GAME**

Alex Austin, known professionally as Cryptic Sea, makes delightfully weird and surprising physics games. Some of them, like *Sub Rosa*, are on Steam, but my favourite Cryptic Sea games aren't so easily found. They come to me like dead drops that were meant for someone else: a download link in a reply to someone on Twitter, a YouTube video about a hockey league no one's ever heard of, an itch.io page linked in Discord. The last drop I intercepted drafted me into a flying, flailing duel with a stranger: our bodies were robots and our weapons were dunks.

I had discovered Cryptic Sea's *Basketball Game*, which you can download at crypticsea.itch.io. It comes in a file called *basketballtest2.zip* and Windows assumes that the executable is a virus. It isn't – that's just the kind of cosily informal software publishing we're talking about. There is only one server. It's called 'Basketball' and supports 16 players. When I launched the game, it contained one player.

▶ TYLER WILDE



THIS MONTH
Didn't dribble, just dunked.

ALSO PLAYED
Chivalry 2, Just Act Natural

I, ROBALLER

In Cryptic Sea's obscure hockey game (called *Hockey?*), the mouse directly controls the stick; you have to actually flick your wrist to take a wrist shot. That literal, *QWOP*-style control is one of Austin's defining motifs, so I knew I wouldn't find a key that simply shoots the basketball. In *Basketball Game*, holding the left mouse button extends the arms and grabs onto the ball, and letting go releases it. That's where most of the action happens, but the left mouse button can also be used to pull the ball to your chest and push it back

out in front of you. WASD moves, Ctrl crouches or stands up, Space jumps and Shift locks the legs so that you can rotate just your torso and heave the ball like a sack of flour.

Since the only other player was the mysterious 'Rem', number 78, we were stuck in warm-up mode. That's OK, because I had warming up to do. At first, Rem mostly just watched me as I grabbed the ball, sprinted across the court, and leapt into the wall behind the net. If you fall awkwardly, your legs buckle and you flop to the ground. I kept forgetting that I had to hold Ctrl to stand up so I'd wind up doing push-ups while the ball bounced away from me.

Once I understood it better, the laughs kept coming: Rem tripping over me, me tripping over Rem, both of us colliding in the air and twirling to the ground. It was the best game of basketball I've ever played.

I haven't met anyone else in *Basketball Game* since my match with Rem, but I've seen clips of full servers, and people are legit good. If you use Twitter, follow @crypticsea for glimpses at prototypes and links to test builds – it's a rare good social media decision. ■

IF YOU FALL AWKWARDLY, YOUR LEGS BUCKLE AND YOU FLOP TO THE GROUND



This is also playing basketball.



BELOW: The official story is, "In the future, robots play basketball."





“This type of blockbuster just doesn’t get made anymore”

Diving into the gloriously stupid past with **STRANGLEHOLD**

Over the past month, I’ve spent hundreds of hours feasting on *Elden Ring*, but now I’m hungry for something a little less... demanding. A game where the only brain cells I need are the ones that know how to point and shoot. An experience that understands the value of allowing you to fire a gun at a man’s groin and have them pull an exaggerated grimace in response. *Stranglehold*, the living embodiment of the phrase ‘simple pleasures’, is my meal of choice.

Years have passed since I last turned to Inspector Tequila’s brand of *Max Payne*-esque slo-mo shenanigans, but age has yet to dull what makes it such a perfect palette cleanser. Firstly, there’s a welcome sense of frenzy from minute one, where you start by sliding and shooting over tables, before quickly learning how to turn Chow Yun-fat’s cop into a perpetual motion machine of justice. From jumping off walls, surfing on tea trolleys, and sliding down staircases,

BEN TYRER



THIS MONTH
Moved around in half-speed to honour Tequila Time.

ALSO PLAYED
Elden Ring, *Sifu*

the flashy moves put you in the director’s chair of your own dumb action masterpiece.

TEQUILA GUNRISE

Then there’s the gloriously silly power-ups that add a little extra pizzazz, called Tequilla Bombs. One allows you to target a specific part of an enemy’s body, showing you a close-up of the person after your bullet hits them. If *The Simpson’s* theory that there are few things funnier than a man getting in the

groin needed additional evidence, *Stranglehold* provides it in spades.

That comedy isn’t unintentional either. This is a game that knows exactly how to deliver dumb thrills, with one set-piece such a perfect example, it made me snort. Tequila barges into a jazz lounge in a casino to be confronted with several tooled-up goons. The band in the centre of the room stops as everyone eyes each other up. Before a single shot is fired, one barks at the band, “Who told you to stop playing?” They oblige by playing a manic number to soundtrack the ensuing carnage.

However, as much as I hold affection for *Stranglehold*’s utter nonsense, there’s a tinge of sadness here. I’m returning to it because this type of uncomplicated blockbuster just doesn’t get made anymore. I don’t want every game I play to require hundreds of hours of investment. If far too many modern action games bolt on RPG elements to keep your attention over a longer stretch time, then *Stranglehold* is a reminder of the value of actually earning it. ■

THERE’S THE GLORIOUSLY SILLY POWER-UPS THAT ADD A LITTLE EXTRA PIZZAZZ



GUILD WARS 2

Enjoying End of Dragons from the sidelines. *By Fraser Brown*

My progress through *Guild Wars 2* has been extremely haphazard. For reasons I can't recall, I dropped the MMO before the first Living World season kicked off – so nearly a decade ago – but I finally returned last year to play with a group of co-op buddies who've been playing for years.

This means I've been dragged to all sorts of fun activities and events and fantastical new locations entirely out of sequence. I don't know what's going on, who anyone is, or where I am in the timeline at any given point – but I'm having a blast. For a while, I was collecting chilis and attending Charr heavy metal concerts to earn a microphone skin for one of my weapons from Icebrood Saga (the fifth season) before I'd even finished the vanilla campaign.

It's all very confusing. And now *End of Dragons*, the third expansion, is out. With it comes a new continent, fishing, boats and wee bots that help you do all manner of things. But I've only just started playing through the second season. To make matters even more mind-boggling, the first season was inaccessible until just recently, so I've still got that to do as well. So I

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 28, 2012

DEVELOPER
ArenaNet

PUBLISHER
NCSOFT

LINK
guildwars2.com

have the better part of five seasons and two expansions to get through before I reach *End of Dragons* in my personal timeline.

This hasn't stopped me mucking around in the new continent, getting my own boat or defeating the final boss in a meta-event, though apparently I'll have to fight them again in a story boss battle. That won't be for a while, though, because I'm so far off starting the story missions.

Of course, I can start the story missions whenever I want, as I can with any of the seasonal or expansion stuff. If you're 80 and you've purchased everything, the whole world is open to you in any sequence you fancy. I'm determined to do all this in the right order, however, even as I dash around the world doing all the non-story stuff with my mates, which is only occasionally made more challenging because I've still not got a flying mount and I can't use any of the Jade Bot tech that's so pivotal to *End of Dragons*.

GUILDED AGE

It doesn't seem like the optimal way to experience an MMO, but it works for me. When I'm playing alone, I slowly work through the story, and when I'm in my group they take me on tours of places I probably wouldn't visit for hundreds of hours normally, revealing to me a cornucopia of world bosses, meta-events, achievements, and precious loot. It feels like I'm experiencing all *Guild Wars 2* has to offer all at once, which is both dizzying and brilliant.

GW2 has only gotten better with age, so it's been a treat to skip forwards and visit modern Tyria. That aforementioned boss meta-



WHAT I APPRECIATE THE MOST IS THE LACK OF BARRIERS

event was like nothing I'd played before. I spent most of it dead or waiting on a ship to get near enough to the floating boss platform so I could reach it, but I had a hoot, entranced by the spectacle of all these bold warriors duking it out with a dragon in the clouds.

What I appreciate the most is the lack of barriers. It doesn't matter that I've not even technically started *End of Dragons* – I can still enjoy a lot of what it offers. And this goes for every season and expansion. It's one of the things that gives GW2 this toy box appeal. You just tip everything out onto the floor and pick up the toy you want to play with today.

That philosophy of openness is apparent everywhere, too, not just in the ability to dabble in expansion diversions before technically even starting them. When I'm mucking around in my group, we sometimes encounter obstacles I'm not equipped to handle – usually places I can't reach thanks to my lack of a skyscale. But that's where the teamwork comes in, with my pals using their abilities to teleport me to where I need to be.

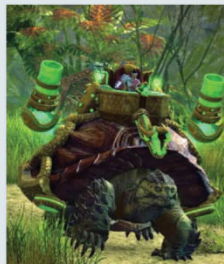
Who knows how long it will take me to actually reach *End of Dragons*? But in the meantime, I'm having a delightful time existing on its peripheries, snacking on it, and a decade of GW2, while leisurely wandering through its story. ■

A DECADE ON

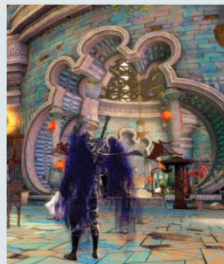
What's changed since I dropped GW2



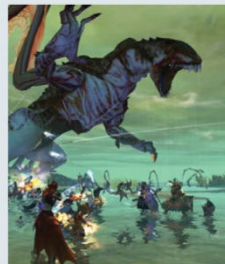
LIVING WORLD
Five seasons of the Living World have come and gone, but thanks to the relaunch of the first season, all of them are now playable.



EXPANSIONS
There have been three expansions, introducing gliding, flying, different approaches to level design, and a number of diversions.



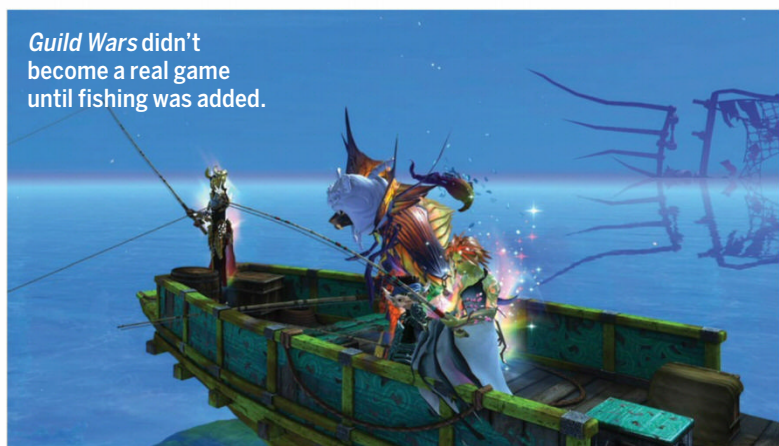
GUILD HALLS
Custom guild halls are a treat, letting you construct loads of utility buildings and flex your creative muscles by plonking down decorations.



MEGASERVERS
The megaserver system means you can play with anyone in your region, regardless of home world, and WvW PvP is also opening up.



Guild Wars didn't become a real game until fishing was added.



ABOVE: I keep being distracted by the hunt for fancier and fancier weapons.

LEFT: Being a big game, I always bring a chair for quick rests.

FAR LEFT: There's no end of cool places to visit these days.



I'm still working my way up to this bad boy.



ABOVE: The world is much bigger than a typical CS map.



COOP_MISSION_RAGE

Fighting ghouls and deathclaws in Counter-Strike. *By Julien Michaud*



LEFT: The hostage has not been rescued.

Counter-Strike has been around in one form or another for over 20 years. It started as a mod for the original *Half-Life* and features the sort of ultra-generic setup expected from hobbyist FPS modes back then: terrorists vs counterterrorists. A couple decades later, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* is one of the world's premiere esports, and the premise hasn't changed much since it first appeared. Its straightforwardness as a shooter is part of its lasting appeal.

But nothing about *coop_mission_rage*, a mod by CTX, could be called straightforward. It's one of many custom CS:GO maps you can find on the Steam Workshop, and as its name suggests, it's a co-operative campaign instead of a PvP shooter experience. In a sense, it's a mod that turns *Counter-Strike* into something a bit more like *Half-Life* again: an adventure with a storyline. But at the same time it also throws in elements of Bethesda RPGs, walking simulator *Dear Esther*, *Age of Chivalry*, and plenty more. Perhaps for the same reason a jpg gets more and more garbled the more times it's compressed, things in *coop_mission_rage* get weird pretty quickly.

NEED BACKUP!

The adventure starts in a medieval dungeon. I'm in a cage, and my friends are in their own cages to my left and right. Two NPC guards are talking about what to do with us when the room goes dark and then suddenly erupts into bright blue light. A huge, horned demon appears, demanding to know the location of a stone, which is the sort of thing demons are usually going on about. Unhappy with the response it gets from the guards, it kills them

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE November 9, 2000	DEVELOPER Valve
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK counter-strike.net

instantly and disappears. The room returns to its torch-lit hue and we're left wondering what happened and trying to find a way out of our cells. I am unsure who the terrorists and counterterrorists are in this scenario.

This is where I begin to realise just how unlike *Counter-Strike* this



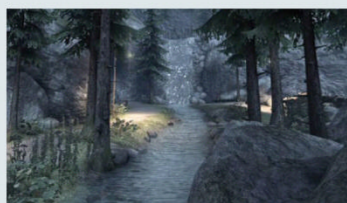
THINGS IN COOP_MISSION_RAGE GET WEIRD PRETTY QUICKLY

experience is going to be, because the answer to the cell problem is lockpicking. Yes, it's a lockpicking minigame straight out of a Bethesda RPG, where you have to turn a lockpick until you find just the right spot. Except the lockpick is your CS:GO knife. As bizarre as the mod already is, it still keeps a few familiar items from *Counter-Strike* intact.

Our first enemy encounter pits us against a giant alien crab creature and some spidery things, so it's a good thing we found some pistols after escaping our cages. The familiar weapons bring us some comfort as we continue to explore this medieval dungeon, and after a brief platforming puzzle I'm feeling pretty confident that we'll make it through alive. That confidence doesn't last long: a goddamn ghoul from the *Fallout* games ambushes me. This doesn't just feel like a Bethesda RPG, it feels like several Bethesda RPGs crammed into one.

ASSET COLLAGE

This mod borrows from some familiar places



SPRUCE TREES

The mod's trees are on loan from the excellent CS:GO map *de_castle* by Yanzle.



DEATHCLAW

The deathclaw from the *Fallout* series isn't planning on planting a bomb or taking hostages.



TEXTURES AND PROPS

Look for medieval models from *Age of Chivalry*, *Pirates*, and *Vikings & Knights 2*.



GHOULS

Sup, ghoul? The deathclaw isn't the only gruesome import from the *Fallout* series.

» To make things worse, an iron gate slams down behind me, separating me from the rest of the team and leaving me to fight the ghoul all by myself. It doesn't go well. I panic, miss a key prompt that probably would've saved my life, and get my HP drained out of my face by the glowing ghoul. I am dead, turned into a ghostly spectator for now. At least that part of it feels like *CS:GO*.

STICK TOGETHER, TEAM

My friends carry on without me, discovering a green chasm with a staircase running up one side of it. More glowing ghouls pour down the stairs as they ascend, but unlike for me, ghouls won't be their biggest problem. The biggest problem is the enormous saw blade that emerges from the wall and soars down the stairs. It instantly kills another member of our team.

The two living teammates continue their ascent, and notice what appears to be another trap. They dare each other to cross first, and eventually decide to go together. 1... 2... 3... nothing happens.

We're all pretty stunned at this point. Is there some kind of RNG going on with the traps and enemy placements? Are we being toyed with? We weren't sure what to expect going in – mods can be a crapshoot, especially single-player and co-op campaigns – but we knew now that we were playing something more sophisticated than we expected.

But it turns out it doesn't need any sophisticated tricks to do me in. Thirty seconds after I respawn with the others who died, I take point again, walk into the next room, and, goddammit, the door slams shut behind me again. I let out a baby-like shriek, again, as I'm lifted into the air by a *Fallout* deathclaw. It hurls me across the cavernous room, and when I stagger to my feet I'm surrounded by more ghouls. I am dead again. I've got over 5,000 hours of *Counter-Strike* under my belt, but I'm simply no match for a bunch of Bethesda baddies in this modded hellscape.

The surviving team members continue on without me again, solving a lever puzzle and fighting some blue exploding dudes on their way to our next surprise: An underground village. A shopkeeper is displaying an AWP – *Counter-Strike*'s most powerful sniper rifle – on a wooden table, the standard way RPG NPCs like to show off their wares.

We had no idea we had any need for money in this mod – especially considering that in *Counter-Strike* you do your buying at the very start of the round – so we hadn't looked for any. We have no choice but to press on. Let's say it's an eco round?

FOLLOW ME!

After some trouble with a boulder puzzle that ends in a squad wipe – thank you, falling spiders – the crew and I respawn in the cages and jaunt through a convenient portal that returns us to the village, glad to not have to redo the platforming puzzle or ghoul encounter at the start a second time. We brute force the boulder puzzle and meet another NPC, this one with voice acting (yeah, this mod with underscores in its name has voice acting). All we need to do to progress is craft a potion. Did I forget to mention that? This *Counter-Strike* mod has a crafting system in it.

The crafting process is a bit janky, as you might expect. The whole thing is janky, to be perfectly honest. There are ghouls and deathclaws and lockpicking and crafting and NPC merchants, but it's all crammed into *Counter-Strike*, so that any of it works at all is kind of amazing. And all of this nonsense cost our Discord crew nothing, by the way; *CS:GO* has been free-to-play since 2018, and there are tons of mods to try on the Steam Workshop.

We're far from done with *coop_mission_rage* at this point, though. Eventually, I push through an archway near the top of the central green chasm and marvel at the ceiling and designs on the walls. An explosion sends me ragdolling into the air. This time I stepped onto a floor tile trap. At least it wasn't a *Fallout* creature and wasn't just me this time: it's another complete squad



AN EXPLOSION SENDS ME RAGDOLLING INTO THE AIR

wipe. We try again and: boom. This is how we discovered that there is some RNG in the mod's puzzles and traps, because the safe path across the tiles changes every time we all respawn.

I won't spoil some of the marvels that follow. None of us are really sure what's happening as we exit the mouth of a cave and gaze across an enormous seaside village as angelic music plays. I almost forget what game I'm playing until I notice I'm carrying *CS:GO*'s SSG 08 rifle.

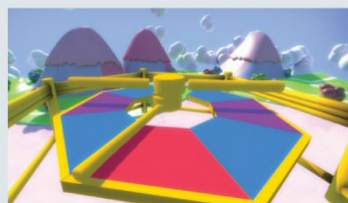
The outside portion of this map is absolutely huge, easily the biggest I've seen in *Counter-Strike*. I separate from my team to explore the huts and homes, which contain more NPCs. A deathclaw glides across the ground in a T-pose. Eventually, we follow the sweet sounds of a bard's lute into a meeting hall, where we meet a man wearing the *Skyrim* helmet who wants help finding his daughter. Long story short, the low-budget cosplayer sends us to a forest at the edge of town, and the horned demon from the beginning of the mod makes his big return.

We battle the teleporting demon under a stormy sky until the final bullet causes him to explode, as demons do. It's a bit anticlimactic, but it's about the journey, right?

Lockpicking, potion crafting, puzzles and traps: all in *CS:GO*. A lot of it, including the music, has been ripped from other games you'll recognise, but I've never played anything quite like *coop_mission_rage*. And it's just one mission in a series from creator CTX, who is one of many Steam Workshop creators who continue to make bizarre and complex mods, some of which make *CS:GO* almost unrecognisable. ■

TRY THESE

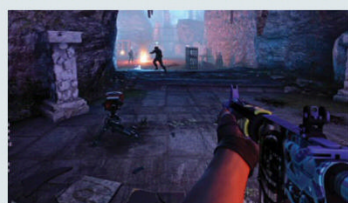
The best Counter-Strike mods and maps



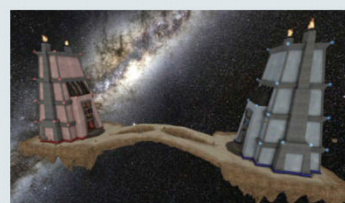
MG_FALLING_GUY
Modder Teteu recreated *Fall Guys* in *Counter-Strike*. It's really a perfect fit.



PLAYABLE GUITAR
Enjoy a chill *STALKER* guitar experience with this fully playable instrument by modder DepoSit.

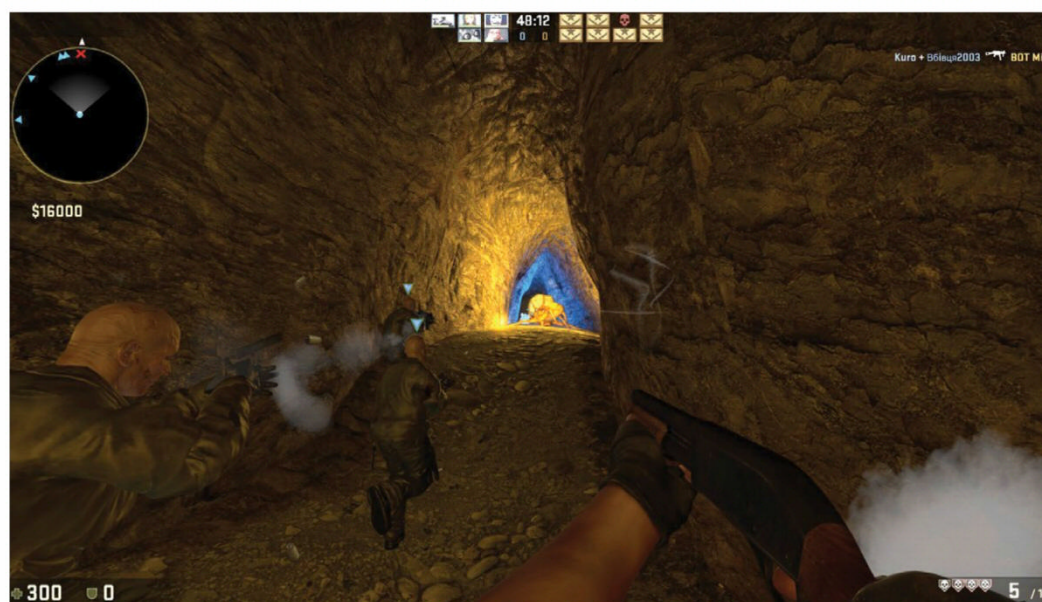
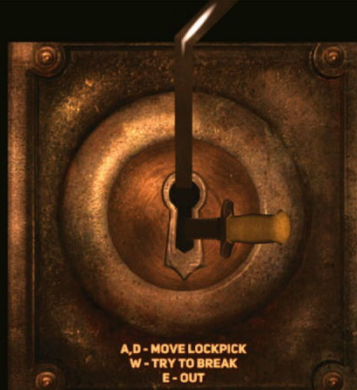


SURVIVAL HARDCORE
Also from CTX, this mod has tower defence, crafting, and wave-based enemy swarms.



FACING WORLDS
Relive the best capture the flag map from *Unreal Tournament*, created by modder Spherix.

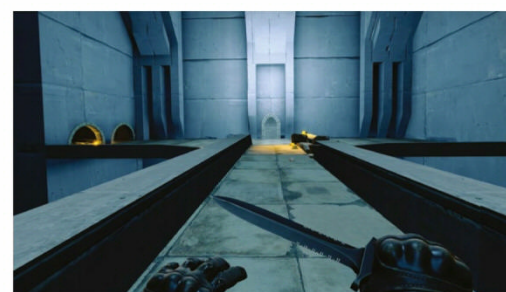
Skyrim
lockpicking with
a CS:GO blade.



ABOVE: Team up
to tackle this
weird world.

FAR LEFT: Fus-Ro-Dad.

BELOW: A ghoulish
surprise.





GET MORE OUT OF OPEN WORLDS

In the destinations that promise the world, set yourself free. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

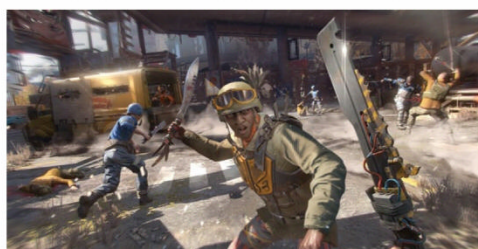
TIME
N/A

VITAL LINKS

Elden Ring guide:
bit.ly/3lFoiiU

Dying Light 2 tips:
bit.ly/3wLYp6b

Cyberpunk 2077 best weapons:
bit.ly/3wDjqBk



RINSE AND REPEAT

1 As with any form of entertainment, you have to know when to stop. Many open-world games dress up the same tasks differently to keep you playing, but remember you can always put it down if you're getting bored. Think of the backlog.



SLOW AND STEADY

2 At the same time, don't rush things if you're having fun. Take as long as you need to fully immerse yourself in an enthralling open world, even if that means just stopping, staring and posing for that perfect photo mode shot. You don't always have to be pushing for completion.



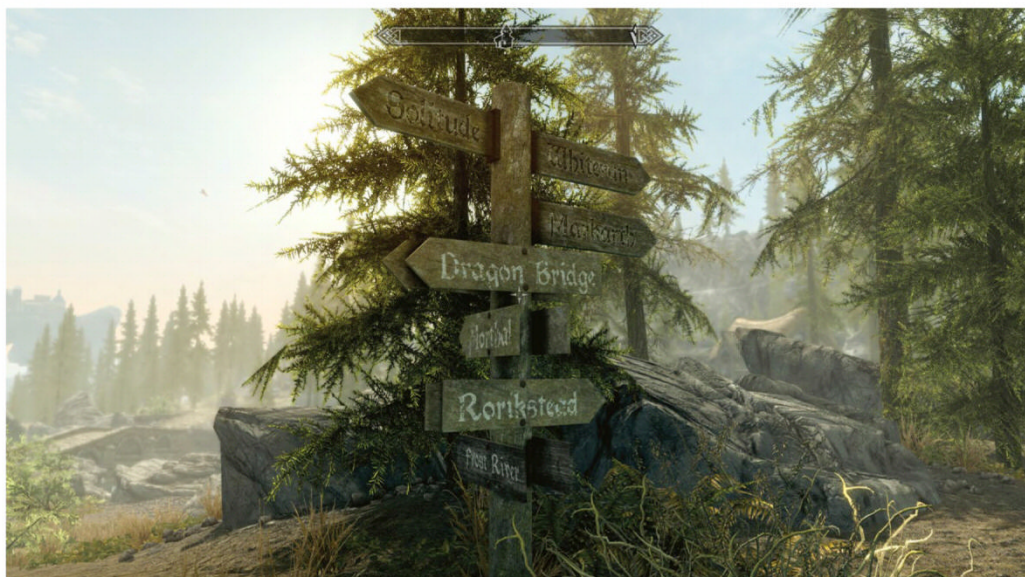
TAKE CONTROL

3 Don't let the game tell you what you should be interested in, either. Test the boundaries of the world, travel off the obvious path, and take some time away from the main story seeing what you can find. Nobody finishes *Skyrim's* main quest first thing, now do they?



SPEED RUN

4 Although, if backlog-bashing is your main focus, sticking to major missions tends to be the quickest way to progress in terms of XP. What's more, main quests will take you to an open world's signature destinations, more often than not.



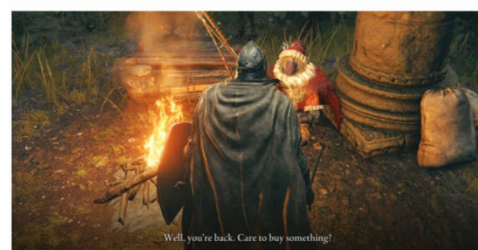
ORDNANCE EXPERT

5 We stick to waypoints too much nowadays. Look up from your mini-map, pick something intriguing on the horizon, and make your own way to it. Map the world in your own mind and it'll stay with you much longer.



SUPER SPEED

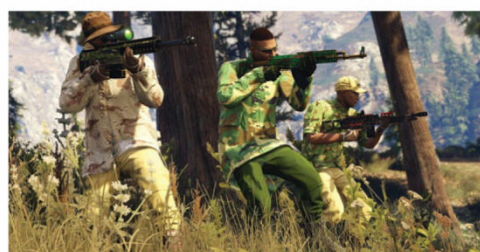
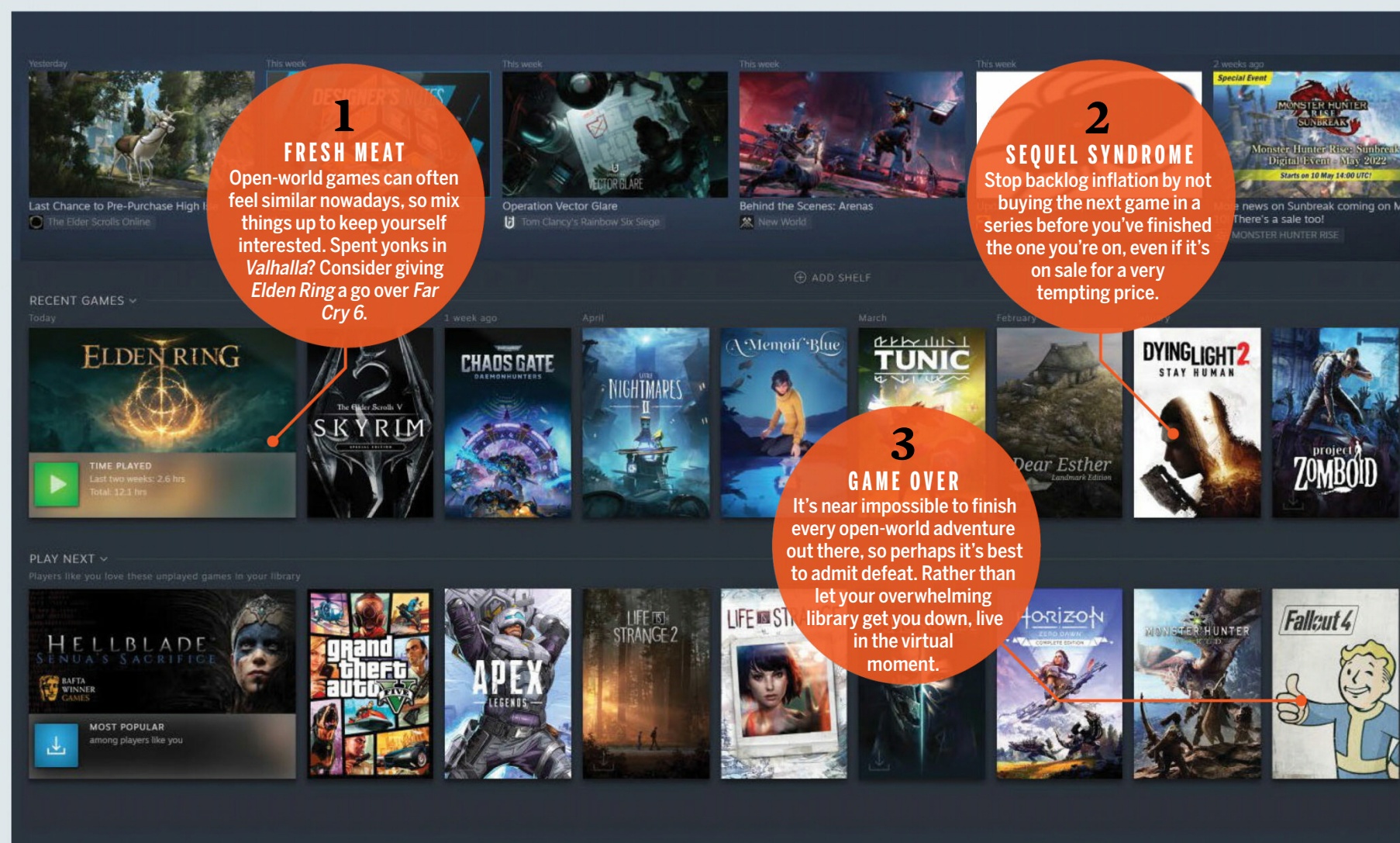
6 Equally, take the opportunity to fast travel if you want to. Many games ask you to see parts of their worlds for yourself and unlock fast travel later, but there's no shame in saving your precious time by skipping repeated journeys on foot.



CHAT BOT

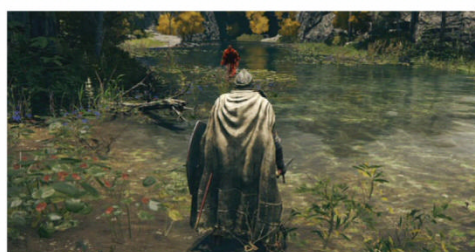
7 That said, to experience everything a virtual world has to offer, you're most likely going to have to get sociable. Speak to every NPC you can find, especially when you reach a new settlement. Hoover up the objectives and see the world.

BACK BREAKING *How to beat your open-world backlog*



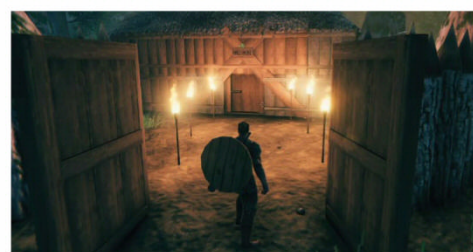
TANDEM TRAVEL

8 Whether you're discovering new galaxies in *No Man's Sky*, shooting up a compound in *Far Cry*, or heisting in *GTA Online*, holidaying in virtual worlds is always better with friends. Drafting in endgame experts makes *Elden Ring*'s trickier bosses a cinch, too.



INVADERS MUST DIE

9 Sometimes the best times you'll have in an open world are with real players you don't even know yet. Take PvP in FromSoftware's games: throw yourself into battles against skilled *Elden Ring* invaders and you may have fun, or even make a friend.



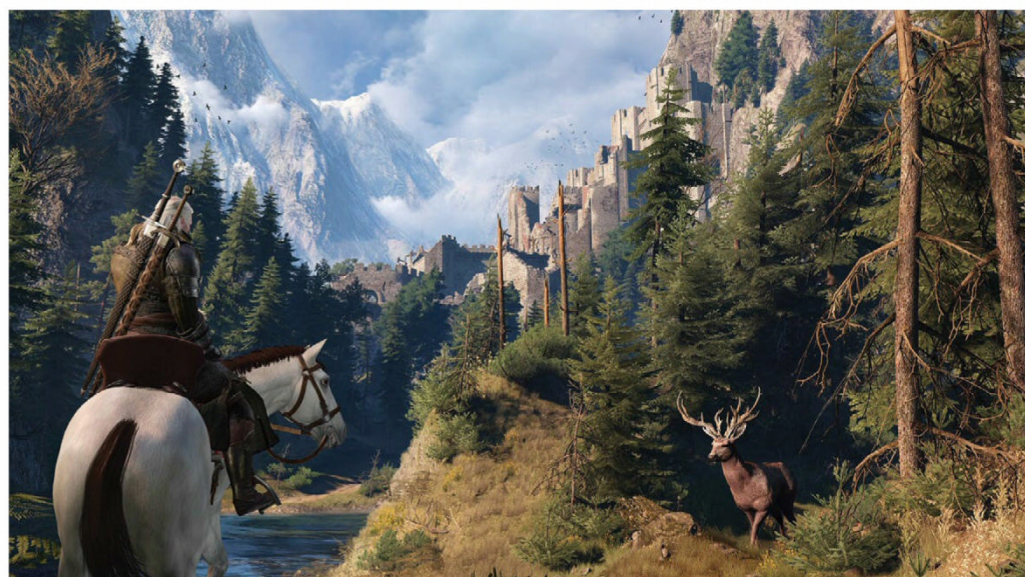
STAMP DUTY

10 Games like *Fallout 4*, *Valheim*, and *The Witcher 3* let you leave your mark on them, more or less, with house building and decoration. Take a break and put down roots in your favourite open worlds, and make them home – it'll give you a sense of space within the game.



WEAPONS FREE

11 It's easy to find a playstyle you like and stick to it for hours, which can be a recipe for monotony if you're strapped in for a long journey. Experiment with other weapons and ways of playing, and respect if you run into any bosses that are giving you trouble.



SEE THE WORLD

12 Plenty of games give you the option to scale back their HUD elements, and the prettier the world, the more you should make those health bars vanish. Let settings like the Northern Kingdoms have the full canvas they deserve.



CREATING THE WORST PARTY OF HEROES IN WILDERMYTH

They're awkward, dysfunctional, and ready to save the world. *By Rick Lane*



Wildermyth is a game about creating legends, heroes whose stories of bravery and valour are passed down through generations. But the thing about legends is the people behind them are often, for want of a better word, pricks. You only need look at history for countless examples of this. Richard the Lionheart? Utter shambles of a king. Christopher Columbus? So unbearably awful that his medieval contemporaries thought he was a jeb. Julius Caesar? Genuinely one of the most destructive human beings to have ever lived, and he bragged about it.

So I want to create some legends who are, if not exactly worthy of the title, at least accurately represent the type of malignant personality that gets warped into a role model by time and the patriarchy. The kinds of narcissists who genuinely believe that only they can save the world, who make all the worst, most reckless decisions and yet somehow come up smelling of roses. I want to make a party of asinine, self-absorbed jerks, and run them through Wildermyth's picturesque fantasy world like a stag party lost on the local golf course.

WILD THINGS

To do this, we're kicking off with the starting campaign, the Age of Ulstryx, and creating three brand new characters – a female warrior named Illa Broadmill, a male hunter called Claynoc Bottlepurse, and a male Mystic ominously named Grifius Kylling. I let the randomiser pick names, appearance, gender, and so forth, but I tinker with their personalities to make them as unfit for heroism as possible. Illa, the troupe's melee vanguard, is a 'bookish coward', Claynoc is a 'snarky loner', and Grifius is a 'decisive greedwagon'. I don't know whether 'greedwagon' is a proper word, but if it isn't, it should be.

The Age of Ulstryx's opening sequence – which sees your party defending their village from a monster attack – also lets you establish specific relationships between characters. For Illa and Claynoc, I pick, 'rivals', as that's the closest I can get to them outright despising each other. I plan to do the same for Claynoc and Grifius, but the game won't let me. Instead, I choose 'romance' as I figure the potential fallout is greater than in a mere friendship.

The quest starts with a pleasing level of dysfunction. Illa bursts through Claynoc's door as fire rages through the village. "Honestly wished you would've skipped," Claynoc mutters as Illa shoves her way inside. The pair

debate what to do about the whole 'monsters tearing up the village' scenario before Illa picks a weapon to defend herself with. There's a pitchfork, a pickaxe and a frying pan. Naturally, I pick the frying pan. "I can't believe I'm dying with you," Illa mumbles.

Luckily, the enemy at the door is a Roe, which is like a deer that's been crammed into a microwave. Illa and Claynoc dispatch it without too much trouble, then rendezvous with Grifius, who's exploring a ruined tower outside of town. "He's not mean," Claynoc says wistfully about his lover. "There's just this kind of unapologetic self-interest, with him... that makes me laugh." I give this relationship six months at best.

READY FOR ADVENTURE, THE WOLVES OF THE CANDLE SET OUT ON THEIR FIRST QUEST

The pair meet up with Grifius outside the tower, who casually announces that he "does magic now". Because of this, they collectively decide that they're a company of heroes, calling themselves 'The Wolves of the Candle'. I don't know what that means. I don't think they know what that means. But it's a better choice than Grifius' suggestion, 'Father's Generation'.

MYTH TAKES

Ready for adventure, the Wolves of the Candle set out on their first quest. What could it be? Saving a local farmstead from bandits? Helping out a travelling merchant who encounters trouble on the road? Not quite. They head into a magical forest to cut down a sacred tree. This incurs the ire of a forest guardian, who's a bit like an Ent from The Lord of the Rings. Only in this version, Merry and Pippin chop it into firewood. Illa expresses some concerns about their complicity in fantasy deforestation, but by this point off-brand Treebeard is already on the logpile.

After their brush with nature, the Wolves head into town, where they recruit a new warrior named Frelwane. The game describes him as a 'hotheaded poet', which makes him sound like fantasy Eminem. Anyway, Frelwane quickly demonstrates his aptitude for adventuring life, when the group happens upon a trio of eerie, dancing spirits. Frelwane decides they should get involved, which Illa gently suggests might be a "profoundly bad idea". Undeterred, Frelwane joins in with the ghostly festivities. When he emerges, he has aged ten years. At least the group has a veteran among them now, although by far the most grizzled part of Frelwane is his brain.

Now led by Dim Shady, the group travels to the province of Ultol Dreamloom (ironically a nightmare to pronounce) where Claynoc, master of stealth that he is, gets captured by a group of peasants who plan to sacrifice him to 'The Great One'. His acquaintances deliberate how to free him. Reason with the cultists? Or rescue Claynoc by force? I think we've already established that the Wolves are not reasonable types. Force it is!

The assault goes well, in that only one of the Wolves gets killed. As Frelwane and the others deal with the cultists, Grifius gets caught on the flank by the Great One, and is dealt a mortal blow. Knowing his fate his sealed, Grifius rushes the beast, doing as much damage as he can

THE RULES

1. Characters always make the most reckless narrative decisions.

2. Consequences must be lived with.

3. Must try to complete the quest.





» before the darkness takes him. It's a brave final act, although it would probably be more effective if he was armed with anything other than a wooden spoon. The remaining Wolves finish off the thoroughly spooned Great One, then bury their fallen comrade. Claynoc seems oddly unmoved by the death of his lover, although by this point it has been about six months, so perhaps the sheen has worn off.

The group process their grief over Grifius by immediately hiring a new member, a female Mystic named Sina Shy. Soon after, they achieve something vaguely heroic, defeating a Gorgon that has turned an entire village into stone. They're too late to save the villagers, of course, but at least they kill the beast. To celebrate, they decide to take ten years off, only returning to adventuring when Illa discovers the location of a powerful weapon called the Seaspear.

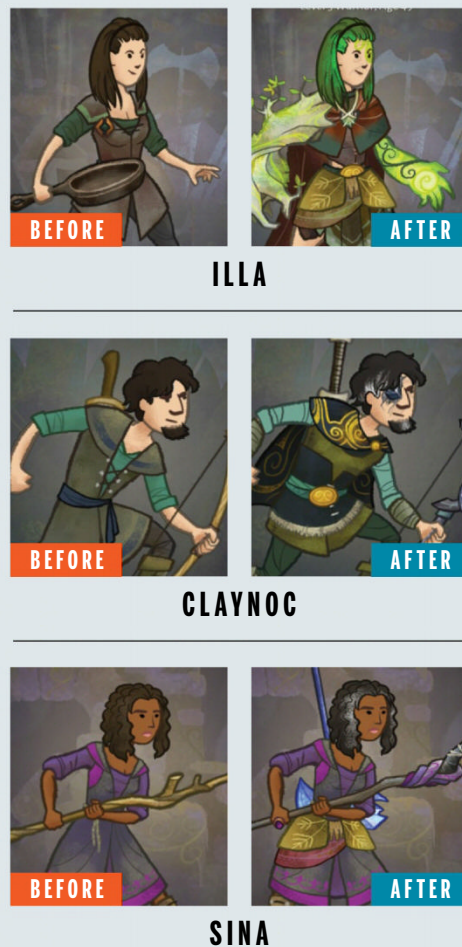
SPEAR FACTOR

The reason Illa is doing this research is likely down to her bookish nature, a trait which has been enhanced by the fact that she has spent the last decade slowly turning into a tree. It's all because of an enchanted splinter she caught hiking through the woods with Claynoc, a splinter she left untreated because the Wolves of the Candle think 'septicaemia' is the name of one of Ulstryx's minions. This isn't the only transformation the Wolves undergo, either. Soon after they've left home on their second outing, Frelwane demonstrates his knack for heedlessly rushing into things by deciding to shove his whole arm into a giant magical fire, turning him into a kind of half-flame elemental. I can't say I'm surprised, the game did warn me that he was rather hot-headed.

In most fantasy stories, the middle chapter is the most exciting, the point at which the heroes face their darkest moments, the challenges that will make or break them before the final battle. But The Wolves of the Candle are not like other adventuring parties, and so little happens in their second act you'd think it was commissioned by Prime TV. The most interesting occurrence is that they

EVOLUTION OF A 'HERO'

Wildermyst's characters change and evolve. Here's a few examples:



recruit another new member, a young hunter named Marti Burly. Marti's primary characteristic is that he's a huge goofball, as demonstrated when he describes killing a particularly squishy kind of monster as "like popping a zit".

The party retrieves the Seaspear with little incident, whereupon they take another decade off to recover from all that sitting around the campfire picking their teeth with the bones of their enemies. Illa's transformation into a tree continues, while Frelwane's fiery infection spreads to both arms. This leaves both my warriors unable to wield conventional weapons. On the plus side, the party is joined by Frelwane's now-adult son, Borwane. Unlike Frelwane, Borwane is a Mystic, and given his father's condition, presumably has a phobia of hugs.

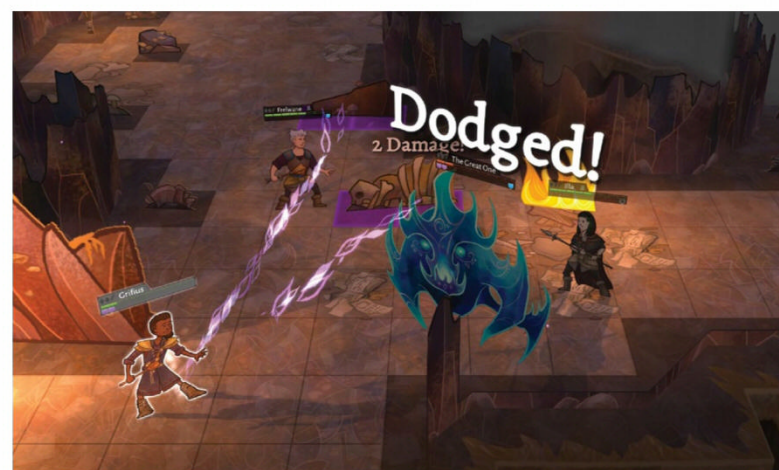
Now six members strong, there's little that can trouble the Wolves of the Candle. So when a mysterious storm begins to drown the lands in floodwater, they decide to split into two groups. Young Borwane leads Marti and Sina to discover a way to stop the flooding, while Frelwane, Illa, and Claynoc head off to, uh, scout distant lands. It may look like they're jolly off on holiday while letting the kids do all the hard work, but it's definitely not like that.

Nonetheless, things initially look bright for the Pups of the Candle. As they travel toward their destination of Supplewade Cave, they're joined by a young female warrior called Hope. In a region known as Scantkiss Brooks, they bravely leap to the defence of a lone woman being attacked by Gorgons. By which I mean, they use her as bait while they prepare to ambush the beasts "We should use people as distractions more often!" says Hope, revealing herself to be a natural Wolf.

Anyway, the battle is a disaster. The ambush goes well, and the party brings down a couple of nasty monsters. But they overlook a small, mutant racoon that has been hexed by another monster with a spell that makes it explosive. The racoon scuttles right into the middle of the party, and detonates. Hope is killed outright, while Marti loses a leg to the blast. Borwane and Sina escape

RIGHT: The 'Scooby Doo' approach to questing.

FAR RIGHT: Grifius, we hardly knew ye. And yet, it was enough.





THE RACCOON SCUTTLES RIGHT INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE PARTY, AND DETONATES

with comparatively minor wounds, but their time as a solo party is over before it has ever got started.

HOWL TO

At least their sacrifice wasn't in vain. The elder Wolves have made some remarkable discoveries while their younger companions were busy losing limbs and dying. That's right, they found some haunted cows! Yep, the most exciting thing to happen to Illa and Frelwane during this period is that they stumble upon a farmer whose cattle has been infected by Gorgon corruption. They can't even save the cows. They just kill them and leave the farmer feeling a bit sad. Claynoc, meanwhile, tries to steal a jewel embedded in some ancient statue, and ends up with a chunk of it stuck in his eye.

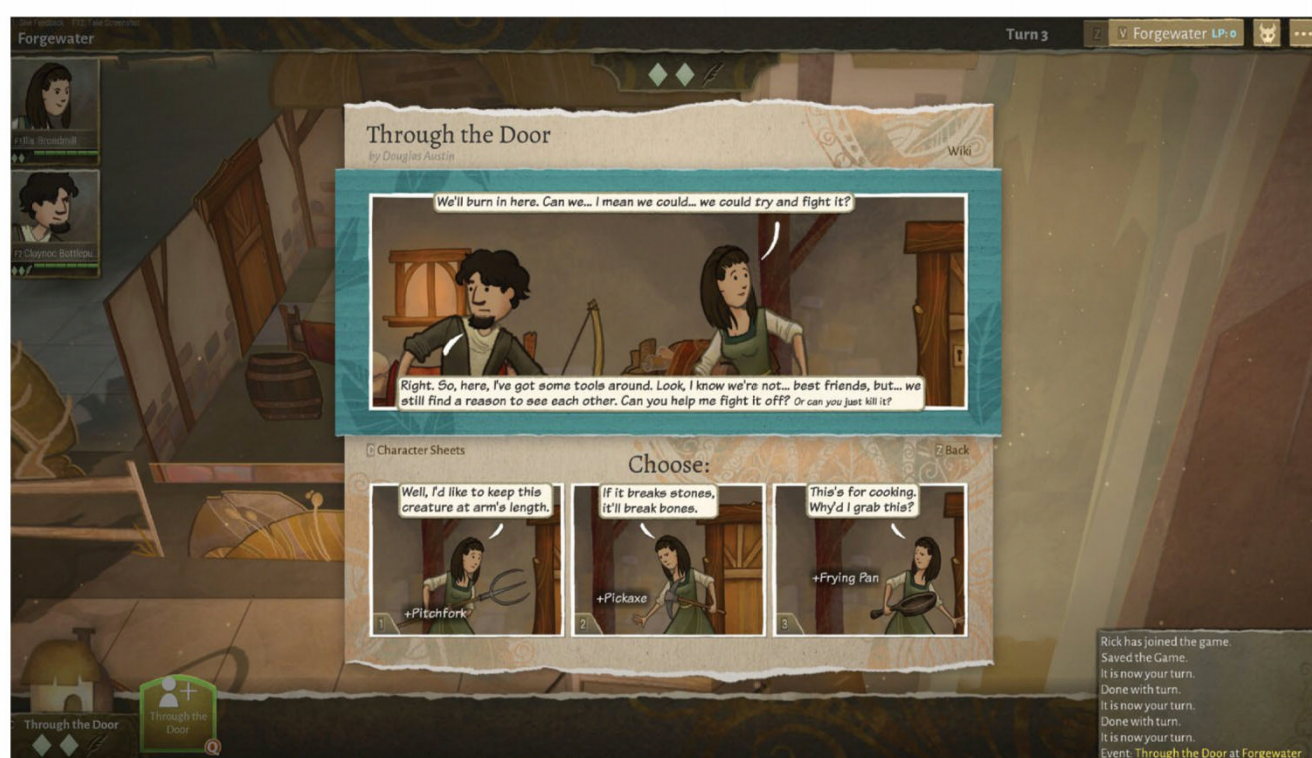
The two parties eventually rendezvous up at Supplewade Cave, and after what are undoubtedly some very awkward conversations, travel together to Dapplereign Altar, for the final confrontation with

Ulstryx. Here, there's a lot of melancholy talk about last stands and noble deaths. "If I die today, I won't have to live in a world wrought by my defeat," proclaims Frelwane, while Illa sombrely states that, "Even in the relentless rain, it was a lovely place to die."

Ultimately though, the Wolves of the Candle end up kicking the shit out of Ulstryx. They might be about as heroic as an island of rats fighting over the last coconut, but they have become extremely good at killing things. And in the end, that's how most legends get started. You don't need to be a hero, you just need to be the last bastard standing. ■

ABOVE: Illa always gets to the root of the problem.

BELOW: A frying pan might seem like a silly choice of weapon, but remember, you can cook whatever you kill with it.



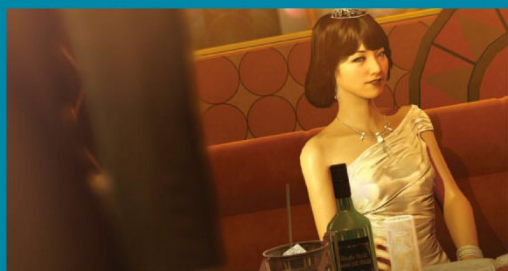


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

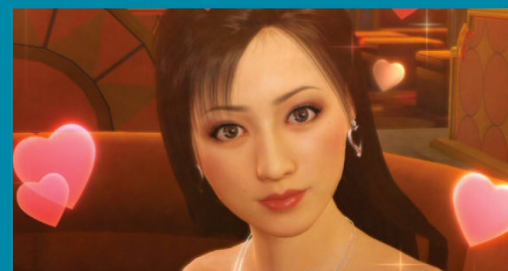
YAKUZA 0'S HOSTESS CLUB

Cabaret Club Czar could be a whole standalone game. *By Lauren Morton*



LEFT: By the end, I'm soundly outnumbered by hostesses.

RIGHT: Bring a notebook to those practice dates.



The *Yakuza* series is part Japanese organised crime drama RPG, and part slice-of-life about helping kids win the claw game at an arcade, teaching novice dominatrixes about self confidence, and writing the perfect postcard to a radio show. In *Yakuza 0*, it's also about side-hustling as a hostess club manager. If it were possible to see the breakdown of my 65-hour playtime, you'd rightfully think that Majima Goro had given up his life of crime for good and become a full time stylist, date coach, and bartender, because I absolutely love *Yakuza 0*'s hostess club management game.

MANAGER WANTED

A few hours into the rip-roaring drama and distractions of Kamurocho in the 80s, *Yakuza 0*'s co-protagonist Majima is pulled away from his main daytime gig as the manager of a cabaret venue to manage a newfangled cabaret club. It's a smaller joint, but a hostess club nevertheless, where men pay for a cover to chat up and buy drinks for pretty young women. Trouble is, Club Sunshine's nominal top hostess is awful at being chatted up, and the club itself needs a lot of TLC too.

I wasn't expecting to spend much time there. I didn't enjoy the Real Estate Royale minigame on Kiryu's side of the plot, and figured that the club management would be equally missable. There is not a single thing about the Cabaret Club Czar game that deserves to be skipped.

It's part dress-up game, in which you'll pick clothes, hairstyles, and jewellery for your hostesses, all of

MINI MAXI

Spec stats for a top hostess



1 The long, trendy hair makes Yuki less Cute but way more Sexy.

2 Her bodycon dress is another sacrifice to the Sexy altar.

3 Add a Sexy triple silver necklace, seeing a pattern yet?

4 To round out her stats, Yuki gets some +Cute pink nails.

which have an impact on their stats: beauty, sexy, cute, and funny. You know, classic RPG stuff. But behind the earrings and pumps is a genuinely fun real-time management game.

Raking in food and drink sales is the name of the game, which my roster of hostesses earn over the course of a shift from their customers. It's on me to pair hostesses up with customers they can impress based on their skills – talk,

IT'S PART DRESS-UP GAME, IN WHICH YOU'LL PICK CLOTHES, HAIRSTYLES AND JEWELLERY

party, love, and 'skill' (which is apparently their wit and intelligence).

Things get no less than hectic on the club floor each night. Customers show up regularly, spending a short or long session at one of my six booths, and need a matching hostess with the skills and looks they prefer. Hostesses lose stamina, take sick days if I overwork them and routinely call me to their table to deliver a menu, glass, or ashtray, each of which I have to remember by their hand signals.

Each hostess can only entertain one guest at a time, and I found myself in a panic swapping out a woman from a customer with shallow pockets to go ply one who would shower her with drink orders. Other times I have to risk a woman with a client that won't like her and hope she hangs in there until another woman finishes her current date.

PLAY DATES

That's just the minigame itself. Over the course of the story, Majima and his ladies outrank the competition, recruit the top hostesses from rival clubs, and grow as people.

As Club Sunshine's manager, Majima also gets to know the women he hires, taking them on dating sim-like practice dates to help them improve their skills for real customers. They're adorable, each and every one, with their own personal stories that unfold across several dates: Hibiki who's become guardian to her kid brother, soft spoken Ai the low-key loner, upbeat sporty girl Saki, Chika, Mana, and Sunshine's zero-to-hero hostess Yuki.

All of Sunshine's ladies are more than their archetypes, making conversation practice dates no joke. More than once, I'd learn something about a hostess on one date and be asked to recall it hours later on the next. I always desperately wanted to fill up those pink heart bars but, as in life, I couldn't always correctly understand what they wanted or struggled when my dialogue choices came out of Majima's mouth a bit different than in my head. I tried to do right by each of them, supporting them as friends, and the reward was an adorable found family of young women in the big city.

The *Yakuza* series often dabbles in hostess clubs and dating, but the full management and dating sim of *Yakuza 0* is so much more than a minigame. If Ryu Ga Gotoku ever launched it as a standalone, I might just put 65 hours into that too. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2018

DEVELOPER
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
yakuza.sega.com



LEFT: Managing a club shift is overwhelming at first.

RIGHT: The story interludes are traditional *Yakuza* goofiness.





A roguelike played on the edge of your seat





NUCLEAR THRONE

Irradiated, bloodied, and still the best roguelike around. *By Nat Clayton*

In an instant, it all comes back. The immediate sense of danger. The strategy, the weapons, remembering to grab a grenade launcher for the 2-1 bonus round and remembering to avoid opening the gates in 3-2 and 5-2 to keep them safe for the eventual loop. I make it to the Throne at record pace, busting the generators to break into the secret second phase... and then I beef it. Melted. A promising run killed in an instant, doomed by one slip up.

I need you all to understand, I used to be hot shit at *Nuclear Throne*. Back in uni I was obsessed, making sure to get a daily run in every morning before heading to class, ill-advised subwoofer blasting the sounds of Joonas Turner's fat bassy gunshots

into my neighbours' ceilings (probably). Even if I never topped the leaderboards, I was a regular sight in the top 25, frequently clawing my way into the top 10.

Because while *Nuclear Throne* was never the deepest or most strategic roguelike, it's raw, loud and incredibly satisfying, a buffet of crunchy pixelated murder where even the most successful runs can easily be crammed into a lunch break.

THRONE BUTT

Nuclear Throne is a 2015 twin-stick shooter by Vlambeer, the (now-defunct) crafty Dutch rascals behind equally screen-shaking games like *Luftrausers* and *Ridiculous Fishing*. It is, generously speaking, a roguelike – maps are procedurally generated on the fly, weapons are scattered across levels, levelling up grants you a choice of upgrade 'mutations' to

plug into your body, and death is both quick and permanent.

But unlike a *Binding of Isaac*, *Slay the Spire*, or even *Enter the Gungeon* (its closest relation, mechanically speaking), *Nuclear Throne* isn't really a game about strategising builds or long-term planning. It's a roguelike played on the edge of your seat, selecting from a scant list of upgrades in a blind panic in the hopes that you're either carrying, or might find, the weapons that make it all click.

It works, because the simple act of blasting stuff in *Nuclear Throne* is joyous. Vlambeer wrote the book on game feel, and when even your piddly little starting revolver kicks up bass and punches the screen, you know you're in for a good time. The world is built up of tiles, and some weapons (explosives, particularly spicy energy weapons) will blow out chunks of these walls, while some bosses might even charge through 'em in a murderous rage.

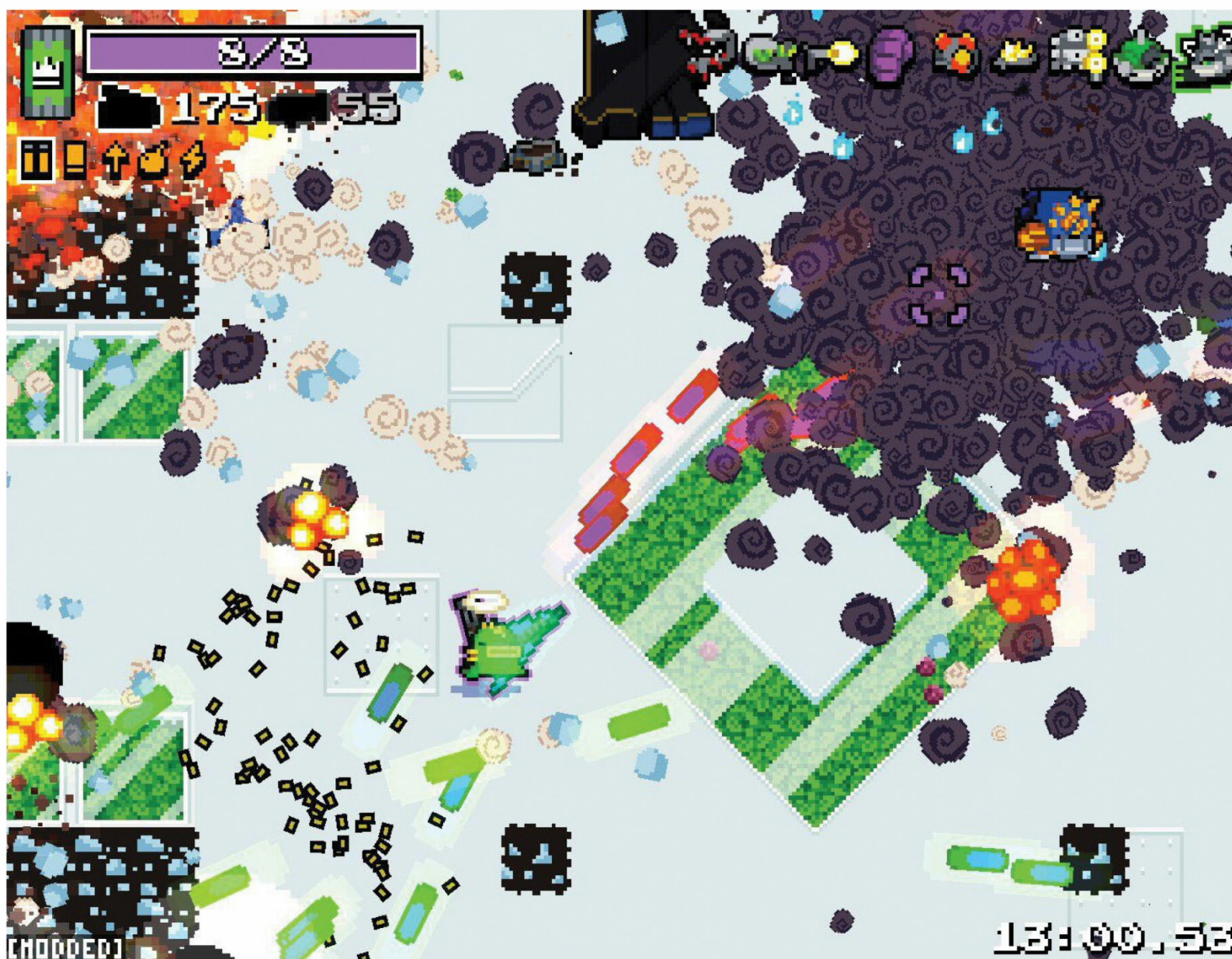
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Dec 5, 2015

PUBLISHER
In-house

DEVELOPER
Vlambeer

LINK
nuclearthrone.com



LEFT: The *Omega Weapons* mod tends to get a bit silly.

RIGHT: He's got brains and brawn.



» GENE POOL

Rather than synergising into weird and wonderful combos, 'mutations' tend to benefit stuff you're already doing. Better health and ammo drops, shotgun shells that bounce further, crossbow bolts with aim assist, halos to grant you a second chance, each framed as another gross little mutation bursting out of your messed up little guy.

Nuclear Throne's characters are a wonderfully screwed up band of

freaks, mutant fish and living crystals, and rebel bandits who turn their flesh into smaller, friendly bandits. They each have their own quirks, usually in abilities, but often in how the world responds to their presence.

YV is a floating triangle from Venus, and you're guaranteed to crash his pad on reaching level 10 to pick from a literal pile of guns, while simple ol' Fish will always get a guitar on reaching Throne 2. Rogue is on the run from her

former extradimensional cop buds, and will be accosted by them from the offset – a small price to pay for being able to summon in devastating airstrikes at will.

Unlocking these characters at all is also refreshingly old school in its strangeness. There are no levelling thresholds or unlocks – and while early characters are unlocked just for reaching certain stages or beating the game, you need to get creative to find others. Horror will only show up if you avoid those tantalising rad canisters scattered about each stage.

And that's really the thing about *Nuclear Throne*. It's a deceptively simple game on the surface – shoot gun, mutate, don't die, kill god's chair, easy as. But the more you poke and prod, scraping away at those wonderfully destructible walls, the more secrets you find. Hidden stages, hidden bosses, final endings and a world rooted in a more melancholic tragedy than you'd ever have suspected.

FLÄSHYN

Yes, *Nuclear Throne* is a game about being a funky little guy blasting bandits and monsters in a wasteland. But there is a truly astounding level of effort put into

CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT

Heavy is the head that puts on one of the game-changing hats



CROWN OF CURSES

Most chests are now cursed, meaning you won't be able to swap out guns stashed within until you find another cursed gun.



CROWN OF GUNS

Say goodbye to ammo drops, but say hello to baddies dropping blasters more frequently. Risky, but the payoff can be excellent.



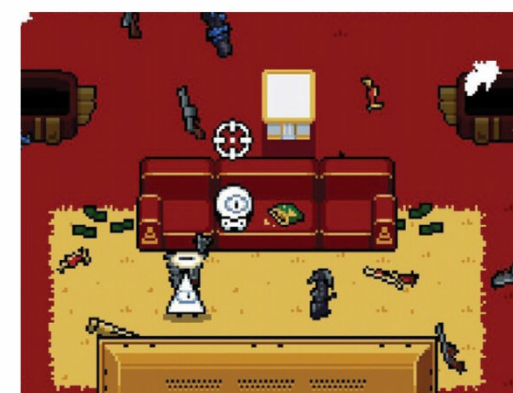
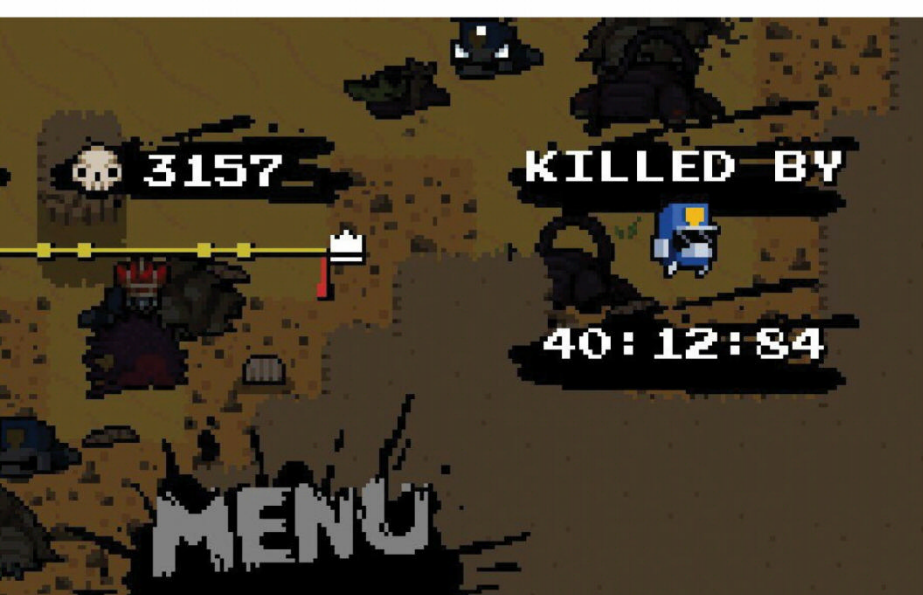
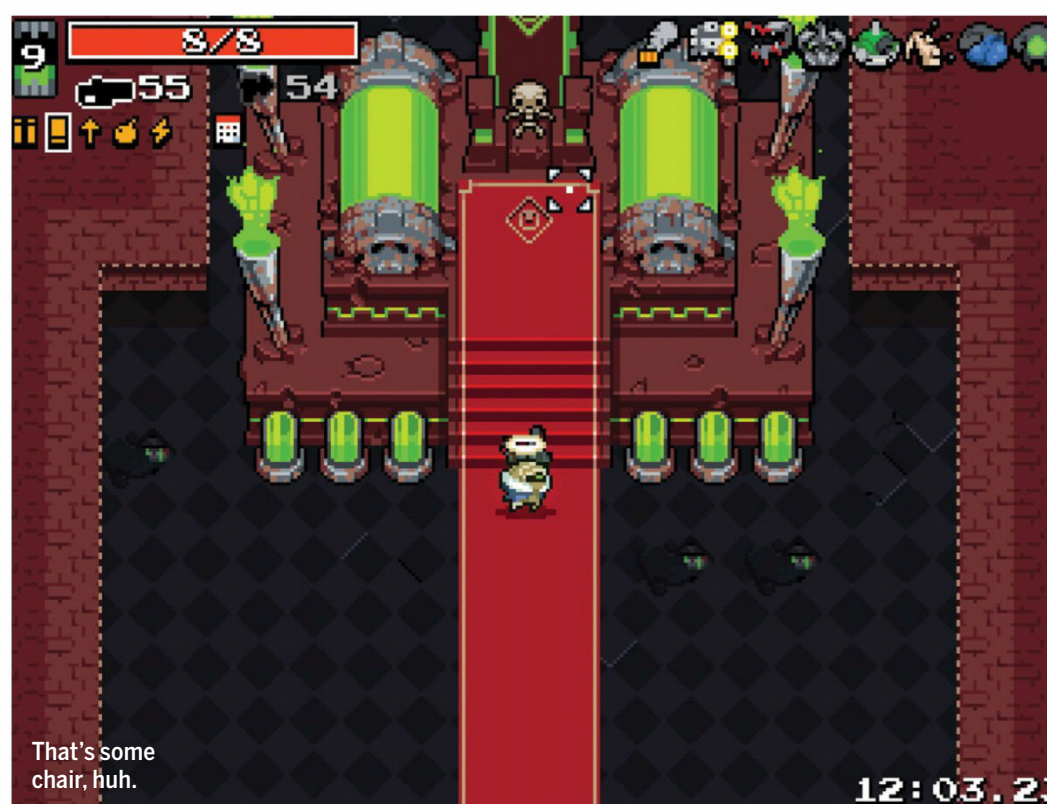
CROWN OF DEATH

All explosions are now bigger, and grenade launchers will fire more grenades per shot, at the expensive of reducing your HP.



CROWN OF BLOOD

A post-loop crown that adds just so, so many more enemies to each stage. Absolutely essential for hitting those daily leaderboards.



making this cartoon universe feel coherent and considered. There's a whole language called Trashtalk for your mutant's guttural screaming – a selection of sounds representing actions, places, and objects.

For example, did you know that at the start of your run your character will often shout “Fläshyn!”, constructed of FL (do) Ä (me/we) SH (this) YN (now), loosely translating to “Let’s do this!”. Rhaäve’sho can be interpreted as “our lives are hard”, while the Nuclear Throne itself is a sharp, choked Fläisum.

It’s a level of care that grounds this goofy world of mutants and monsters enough that, when it wants to, *Nuclear Throne* can pull off moments of real melancholy. You’ll often load into a map playing a more sombre piano variation of the level theme, maps feeling eerie when the dust has settled.

The run-up to the Throne itself is a masterclass in scene-setting, a just-too-long walk up a long corridor while pulled strings ring ominously. Once the fight starts, the music is a desperate howl with frontier strumming, one final effort that begs to ask whether your fight was worth the pain.

A GAME ABOUT BEING A FUNKY LITTLE GUY BLASTING BANDITS AND MONSTERS

Across the board, Jukio Kallio’s soundtrack hits this perfect note of post-apocalyptic western, heavy riffs settling alongside twangy guitars. The game’s credits song is an all-time great, a breath of relief sung in campfire melody.

MODULAR CHAIR

Nuclear Throne, on release, was a perfectly formed thing. But that form took years to take shape, and its development was catalogued in entirety through Twitch. Vlambeer would work on the game in front of a live audience, who would then get to mess with the latest version of the game in Early Access.

In that way, *Nuclear Throne* has always belonged to the community. And in the seven years since release, the community has run wild with the game, a small but fascinating modding scene growing up around it.

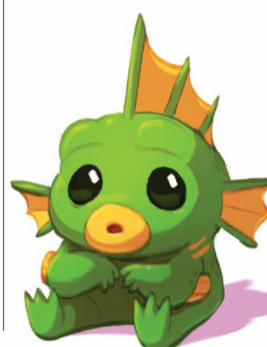
The biggest of these is *Nuclear Throne Together*, which on the surface expands the game’s

multiplayer from couch co-op to full online lobbies of up to four players. But *Nuclear Throne Together*’s secret is that it also cracks the game wide open, acting as a foundation for *Nuclear Throne*’s wildest mods.

There are mods that add guns, mods that change guns, mods that procedurally generate guns on the fly. Mods that let you play as the Soldier from *Enter the Gungeon*, mods that replace every enemy with frogs, mods that slam environments into each other in a dimensional nightmare.

Beyond *NTT*, there’s even a massive *Community Remix* mod that adds three new characters, fifty new weapons, and enough new mutations, crowns and otherwise to turn *Nuclear Throne* into something madly and wonderfully new – but never unrecognisable.

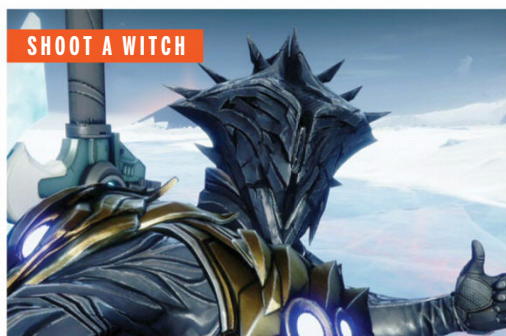
Nuclear Throne is pure, simple, chaos. Mods might turn the game on its side, deep fry it, and cram a thousand tons of explosive into it, but they never pull the game away from the raw thrill of slamming ‘play’ and dropping into a desert full of bandits armed with only a revolver and heavy guitar riffs. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m late for today’s daily. Let’s see if we can’t actually make it back into the top 10 this time, eh? ■



PHIL SAVAGE



Please do not go through previous issues of this magazine to count how many times I've listed *Destiny 2*, *Guild Wars 2*, and a *Yakuza* game, included because those are secretly all I play.

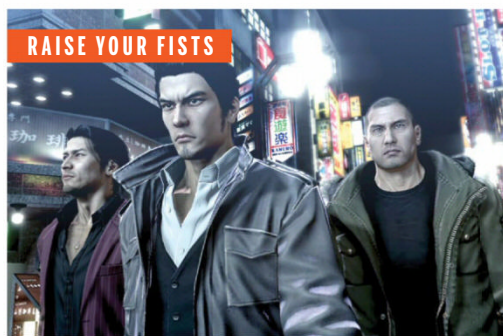


SHOOT A WITCH

DESTINY 2

bungie.net

→ Bungie tried an interesting experiment with this year's *Destiny 2* expansion. For *The Witch Queen*, the developer asked, "What if the campaign was good?" Even if you don't care about *Destiny 2*'s ongoing loot-shooting structure it's definitely worth checking out.

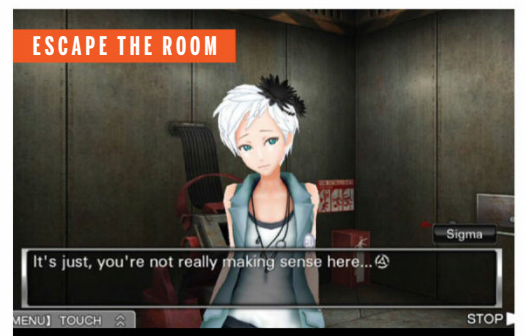


RAISE YOUR FISTS

YAKUZA 5 REMASTERED

yakuza.sega.com

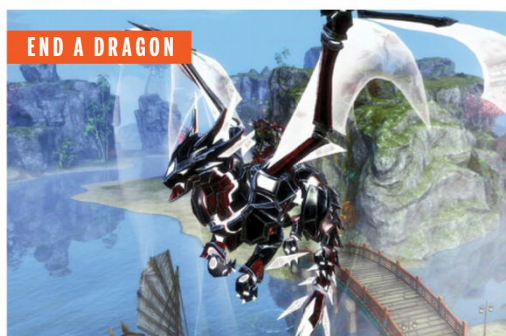
→ If you only play one *Yakuza* game, it shouldn't be this one. But even though there are better entry points to the series, *Yakuza 5* remains my favourite. Ambitious to the point of folly, its five characters each have their own job that manifests in an ongoing minigame.



ESCAPE THE ROOM

ZERO ESCAPE:
THE NONARY GAMES
zero-escape.com

→ "Finally," I thought when a Steam Deck arrived at my door, "my decision to buy a bunch of visual novels on Steam, even though I'd prefer not to play them on my desktop, has paid off."



END A DRAGON

GUILD WARS 2

guildwars2.com

→ My favourite thing about *Guild Wars 2* is that everything it does stays relevant, forever. Even now, with the release of the third expansion, I'm still visiting maps from the first. The downside is it means my wishlist of things to earn keeps growing larger with each release.



SMASH THE SYSTEM

TEARDOWN

teardowngame.com

→ It's been a while since I last played, but the voxel-based destruct-'em-up was a fun time when it first launched into Early Access. With version 1.0 now available, I'm excited to jump back into its heist hijinks – revelling in creative destruction across its inventive maps.



SPIN THE WHEEL

FORZA HORIZON 5

forzamotorsport.net

→ It says a lot about how good the *Forza Horizon* series is that, despite its unbearable attempts to be 'fresh' and 'hip', it's nevertheless a consistent joy. I have many questions about this world's economy, but I'm prepared to set them aside to focus on great racing across a huge map.



BUILD A GRANARY

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

totalwar.com

→ Every time a new *Total War* releases, I think to myself, "Finally, I will learn how to play a *Total War* game properly." And then I realise just how much I have left to learn and bounce right off. *This* time, though, it will be different. I've watched two whole YouTube videos about tactics.



SEE THE WORLD

EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR II

scssoft.com

→ The Steam Deck feels particularly suited for racing games, but, alas, my copy of *Forza Horizon 5* is tied to the Microsoft Store. Instead, I've returned to *ETSII* for my portable driving fix. The map is larger than ever and I'm having fun transporting peaches across the continent.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

RING A DING DING



Are you an evil **GOLLUM** or a friendly **SMEAGOL**?
Take our personality quiz and find out!

What's your favourite meal?

- A. Sushi
- B. Anything but potatoes

What do you think of your Hobbit friends?

- A. They're tricky, false, nasty
- B. We loves the master!

How do you feel about the One Ring?

- A. We wants it
- B. Must have it

How do you deal with negative people?

- A. Murder them
- B. Bite off their extremities

What have I got in my pocket?

- A. Handses
- B. String or nothing

Results

Mostly A: You are a Gollum! You're a wet little cave freak and no one likes you.
Mostly B: You are a Smeagol! You're a wet little cave freak and no one likes you.

...UNTIL **JULY 21**

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



URGENT APPEAL



Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material

and emotional support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

To help protect vulnerable children, donate online at: **www.hopeandhomes.org/donate**. Or call **01722 790 111** Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm.

Please quote **FP22 - G&E** when making your donation.

In the event that funds raised exceed what is needed to deliver Hope and Homes for Children immediate and longer-term response to this crisis, we will use donations where the need is greatest.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



I would like to make a donation to Hope and Homes for Children:

Name	Address
Tel	Email

I enclose a cheque for £ made payable to Hope and Homes for Children or please debit £

from my credit/debit card (details below)

I would like to donate by debit/credit card

☐ Visa	☐ Mastercard	☐ Maestro	☐ CAF card
Card no.			
Start date	Expiry date	Issue no.	Security no.
Signature		Date	

giftaid it

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